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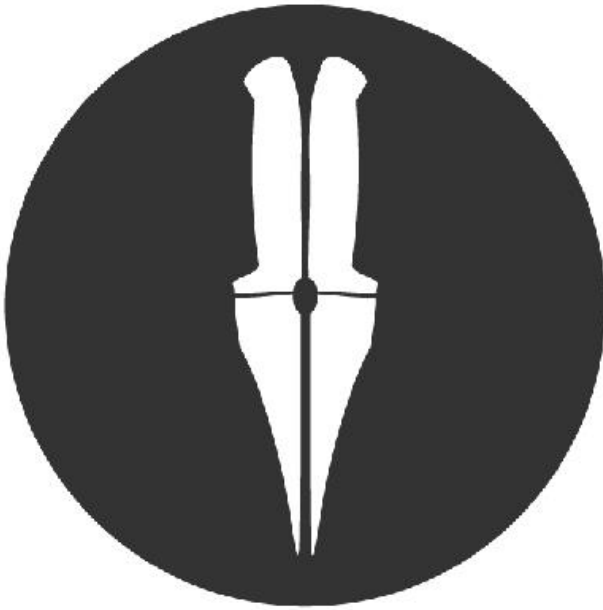
MYSTERIOUS
ISLAND:
HERE BE DRAGONS

— ③ —

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The Mysterious Island III

-HERE BE DRAGONS-



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Greig Beck grew up across the road from Bondi Beach in Sydney, Australia. His early days were spent surfing, snorkeling, and reading science fiction on the sand. He then went on to study computer science, immerse himself in the financial software industry, and later received an MBA. Today, Greig spends his days writing, but still finds time to surf at his beloved Bondi Beach or swim at Parsley Bay. He lives in Sydney with his wife, and a mad golden retriever named Jessie.

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*Dragons never die. They simply hide in our myths, legends,
and the dark corners of our mind*

The Cretaceous-Paleogene extinction event, also known as the KT event, was a sudden mass extinction of three-quarters of the plant and animal species on Earth that occurred approximately 66 million years ago.

It marked the end of the Cretaceous Period and was said to be the end of the age of reptiles and the beginning of the age of mammals.

Most Paleontologists agree that the impact of a large asteroid or comet played a major role. But some scientists point to the fact that many of the mega-animals in existence were already vanishing due to being preyed upon by super predators that left no tetrapod (four-limbed vertebrate) alive on sea or land that was bigger than fifty-five pounds. Then, with no food sources left, they also vanished.

However, one thing all scientists agree on is that if this group of super predators ever returned, a 6th extinction is not just likely, but inevitable.

The search for fossil evidence of these creatures continues today.

PROLOGUE

901AD – Ipswich, borough in Suffolk, England

A small army of the bravest and strongest knights in the land had gathered at the massive cave mouth.

Ever since the Vikings had been vanquished and pushed from the land half a century ago, it soon became known they had left behind a monstrous creature that would be their curse on the home of the Anglo Saxon. And as the years passed, the monster had grown larger than a team of oxen and preyed on their townsfolk.

The Ipswich Devil as it became known, with its yellow slitted eyes, fiery breath that melted steel and flesh alike, and huge spiked back, was blighting the land. For generations the monster had been appeased with offerings of goats, calves, and baskets of fresh fish. But then one year during famine they had exhausted their available stock and the fearful villagers had resorted to offering the only spare meat they had left – people – and a young girl was to be offered up as sacrifice next.

Word of this foul act had reached the ear of the Anglo-Saxon king, Edward the Elder, and he had demanded action. The great warrior, George of Lydda, had been recalled by Edward and commanded to lead the attack. His single mission – kill the beast.

With him was sent the Druid, Merlin Caledonensis, who had his own strange sciences to bring to bear.

George stopped them at the huge cave mouth. “*Dismount*,” he said and the knights slid from their saddles and formed up into ranks.

“Draw swords,” he ordered, and the sound of steel drawn from scabbards moved down the lines of men in shining armor and echoed back at them from the yawning cave.

Merlin, watching from under his thick cowl, lifted his staff that held the burning embers in the top and cast a brooding red glow and made mystic symbols in the air as the pages and squires watched in stony silence.

He then used the embers in his staff to light burning torches that would be held high by the accompanying squires. He turned to offer a small bow to George of Lydda, indicating they were ready.

George faced the impenetrably dark hole. “Forward!” he shouted and with hard, cold steel in his hand, a stout heart, and without a second glance or draw of breath, he led the hundred strong group into the huge cavern.

They continued down into the dark and dank depths, and then down further. Finally, bones crunched underfoot, and some made

slippery as there was still scraps of slimy meat on their shards. Others that were spread about looked strangely melted and were soft, squashing like goose fat beneath their boots.

Merlin could already smell the breath of the beast and knew it was near, maybe even watching them now.

Another five hundred yards and the darkness became absolute. The torches seemed to barely push back the nightmarish gloom and George then held up a hand. Up ahead there was a flat stone, and upon it, metal shackles. But what they held tested the strongest of their stomachs, as there was a pile of melted mush there, that ended with two pale, tiny hands and wrists still bound by the metal cuffs.

“Was that once the maiden?” George asked in a whisper.

“Undoubtedly, Sir George,” Merlin replied. “Burned by the hot breath of the dragon and made to run like candle wax.”

George made a disgusted sound in the back of his throat and crossed himself as he stared down at the revolting mess.

Merlin then straightened as he felt the air shift in the cave. “Be on your guard, brave knights.”

There came the sound – huge, sliding, as if great weighted plates were being dragged over cold stone, and the very rocks were being ground down to dust. Then, smashing out from the blackness of the cave a roar so loud that it bruised the ears and turned the bowels to jelly.

And then the monster appeared.

A handful of the men turned to run. But George stood his ground.

Not just stood his ground. But charged.

The brave knight led them in and as his strong heart stood firm he gave courage to those around him.

But in the first wave of their attack, the beast, as big as three oxen standing on top of each other, pinned the men who charged with him with its yellow-slitted gaze, and opened a cavernous tusk-filled mouth. A torrent of bile jetted forth covering a dozen of them.

The shining, battle-tested armor was no match for the corrosive spit, and where the liquid first found the skin between the rivets, plates, and in through the eye grill, the skin sizzled, burned, and melted like running fat in a fire.

Merlin felt his heart hammer as around him the screams of the men and the roars of the terrible dragon beast were like a cacophony of hell.

The dragon then reared up onto its hind legs, towering high and its spiked and horned head grazed the cave ceiling above them, making rocks fall. It sprayed its molten breath over more of the men and swiped at others, smashing their bodies like kindling with its powerful blows, and as yet, the men had not spilled a drop of its blood.

In just minutes, there were few knights left and George grabbed a long lance and charged forward – it was a good strategy as the belly of the beast was not as well guarded by heavy scales and the lance pierced it.

But the monster was not mortally wounded and a swipe of a claw half the size of George sent him tumbling back through the air to crash into the cave wall.

“Protect George,” Merlin shouted and held aloft his staff with the glowing embers at its top.

Merlin knew then that to stay and fight on, would mean all their deaths. But if they didn’t stop the dragon here and now, it would continue to grow to be the size of a mountain and rampage across the entire country. And he had one more trick to play.

He lifted George and slid his visor up. The man’s face was bloody, but his eyes opened weakly.

“Did I kill it?” he asked, groggily.

“You have slain it, my lord. And now we should seal its bones in the cave forever.” He lifted the man and half turned to see the last of the brave knights still pressing their doomed and futile fight.

Good men, all of them. But their sacrifice will not be remembered, he thought.

He dragged George out and just inside the cave mouth he deposited the leader. “Rest here, sir knight.”

George nodded, lay back breathing calmy and his eyes closed.

Merlin re-entered the cave just as the last of the men were being devoured, their remains liquified and sucked up like a meaty broth. The dragon saw Merlin then, or perhaps the red glow of his staff attracted it, and it began its approach. But Merlin never budged. Instead he reached into his kit and pulled forth an urn with a twisted piece of cloth sticking from its end.

“No more meat for you this day.” He smiled. “Just Greek fire.” He touched the wick-cloth with the end of his staff, and it caught to flame. He tossed it and turned to run.

The urn landed before the dragon and exploded like a million thunderclaps. But the thunder went on as the ceiling of the cave collapsed. Whether the great beast was blown to gobbets or crushed by the cave-in was of no matter. Either it or its bones would be sealed away forever.

Merlin found George where he had left him and lifted the knight and helped him out of the long entrance of the cave. At the entrance, the squires and pages rushed forward, looking for their knights but he stopped them.

Merlin lifted his chin to the group and pinned them with his gaze. “The mighty George of Lydda has slain the dragon, by himself, while

all others perished. The land is safe once again.” He lifted his staff. “Hail, George, the dragon slayer.”

There was silence for a moment. But then the cheers broke out.

Merlin nodded. The land was now safe. And he knew it was close enough to the truth and would make a fine legend for the court to tell and retell, for a thousand years. And it would also be a warning for the future – never let the dragons return.

EPISODE 16

*Some things are hidden, not to keep you from them, but to keep them from
you*

CHAPTER 01

Today – Ipswich, borough in Suffolk, England

The ear-splitting noise changed to an angry scream.

“*Whoa, whoa*, shut it down. Shut it down.” Alistair Drury, the current on-shift manager, furiously waved his arm at Tom Barring, the drill operator, and immediately the massive circulating rock borer whined to a stop.

The piece of machinery was a modern marvel with the cutter alone weighing in at 100-tons, and the massive-toothed head could eat its way through solid rock, of any and all geomorphologies. The only thing it had trouble with was empty voids.

As the shaft fell to silence after a few remaining pieces of rock fell from the ceiling and walls, Drury adjusted his hard hat, grabbed a high-powered flashlight from the rig, and strode forward.

He was joined by Alex Thornet, who was supervising the rock extraction via the carriages, and also, Barring who had slid from the cabin of the borer.

“A void, dammit. A big bloody nothing.” Drury turned. “I thought we took soundings.”

“We did,” Thornet replied and shrugged. “Now and then we miss some, especially if the pockets are deep or honeycombed.”

“Miss some?” Drury swore. “Well, aren’t we lucky it wasn’t full of water, or we’d all be fucking dead now. Am I right?”

“What do you want me to do, boss?” Barring asked.

Drury sighed and swore under his breath. “Grab a flashlight and follow me in. We need to check this out, and I’ll want your opinion on whether we can proceed with the drill or if we need to cauterize the whole damn cave.”

“Or go around it,” Barring added.

“Don’t even think it. Cauterization would be bad enough,” Drury replied bitterly.

Drury hoped they didn’t have to cauterize because that meant the cave was unable to be safely drilled and it needed to be blown, bringing down loose material before they could proceed. It also meant a shitload of more concrete would need to be poured in. Up go the costs, and down go the chances of hitting their completion schedule. Also, down goes his performance bonus, and he was counting on that this year for his holiday in Spain.

Thornet joined them, flicked on his own light, and lifted an arm toward the dark hole. “After you, kind sir.”

One after the other the three men stepped in through the opening.

Drury sniffed. "No methane, at least that's something."

"Bigger than I expected." Thornet shone his light up at the ceiling. "What do you think, Tom?"

Tom Barring looked around. "No real rock falls. Looks old, stable. Might be able to use it, save us some digging time." He turned to Drury. "A little more concrete, but we might even get ahead of schedule." He faced forward. "We should see how far it extends."

"Okay then. Mind how you go, lads." Drury led them on.

After another five minutes their boots began to crunch on something like brittle twigs and shining his light down, Drury frowned, crouched, and lifted a shattered deer antler.

"What's this doing down here?" He shone his light around illuminating the skeletal remains of hundreds if not thousands of animals. "Holy shit."

"Maybe it's like one of those elephant graveyard things," Barring said. "You know, like where they go to die."

"No, they're all different types of animals." Thornet spotted something. "Hang on." He crossed to one side of the cave and lifted a round shaped object covered in moss. "This is a human skull. And it's bloody old."

"Maybe a cave man." Barring chuckled a little nervously. "How old is this place?" He looked around.

Drury turned. "You mean Ipswich? It's one of the oldest towns in England. King John granted the town its first charter around 1200 or something."

"It's way older than that," Thornet added. "Under the Roman Empire, there was a large Roman fort here. And then, the Vikings invaded around mid 800s."

"No shit?" Barring grinned.

Thornet nodded. "Yeah, true, they built huge walls all around it and ruled this entire area for about fifty, sixty years."

"Impressive. You should go on a game show." Drury chuckled.

"Nah, just did a little homework before we started this job." Thornet lifted the skull in his hand. "Alas, poor Yorick. I knew him..." He frowned as he brought it closer to his face. "Hey, this looks melted or something."

"This doesn't look like any sort of graveyard to me." Drury turned about. "More like a killing field, or an animal den. Could it have been a bear's cave? Or maybe wolves."

"This far and deep underground?" Thornet shook his head. "Doubt it. And there's way too many animal bones here unless it was used for generations."

"Hey, check this out." Barring lifted what looked like a few bits of iron and some rotted wood that fell out. "It's a shield, I think. Or

was.” He pointed. “There’s more, and some swords, or what’s left of them.”

Drury crossed to him and nudged some of the ancient weapons with a boot.

Thornet stayed put. “Want to hear something weird?”

“No,” Drury replied, still kicking at the ancient weapons.

Thornet ignored him. “You asked if it could have been an animal den. There was something else I learned in my research. Something weird. It was about a little thing called the Ipswich Devil. It plagued the countryside around these parts over a thousand years ago.”

“The what?” Drury turned.

“Was supposed to be something like a dragon. Apparently, the Vikings left it behind as a bit of a boobytrap for the English when they defeated the Norse hordes. The English had to slay it before the king would reward them with his blessing.”

Drury scoffed. “Sounds like bullshit.”

Thornet looked around. “Some say it was where the legend of St George and the dragon came from.”

“The shield and weapons. Yeah. He fought it right here.” Barring held up a broken sword. “Then this is where he slayed it.”

Thornet looked into the face of the skull. “Or maybe not.”

Drury lowered his light and craned forward. “Something else.” He crossed quickly to the side of the cave and used the toe of his boot to move some debris. His face became bathed in a soft, red glow.

The two other men watched, transfixed.

He bent to lift the football-sized red orb. It was sitting in amongst a pile of strange, dark earth that looked like it had threads of silver running through it.

“And what do you suppose this is?”

Thornet frowned. “Maybe another gift from the Vikings.”

Barring walked toward it as if he was in a trance. He put his hand to his jaw as if he had a toothache, and he squinted into the illumination as Drury held it up.

“That looks...” Barring gently lay a hand on it and then snatched it back. He then flexed his fingers. “It tingles.”

Thornet stared. “Looks like a giant ruby.”

Drury brushed the strange clinging soil from it. “It’s *our* giant ruby. And I bet it’s worth a fortune.” He held it higher, grinning. “I’ll keep it safe for us. And remember, lads, mum’s the word.”

CHAPTER 02

Norway, Lomsdal–Visten National Park – five-miles in from the north-western shoreline

Maja Kristiansen and Oskar Gundersen, both health influencers, followed a new trail as they trekked up into the small, jagged mountains of the national park.

They might have been following an animal trail, or water course, or even a natural pathway where all the plants and even some of the rocks had been crushed as if a bulldozer had passed through. And quite recently. But as there were so few people that ever came so high into this natural area, a human traffic pathway was unlikely, to the point of being impossible.

The odd thing was, they had been camping out for two days as they made their way from the shoreline up to the peaks for a few pictures of the view over the glacial valleys for their social media accounts, but as yet had seen no animals. Nothing. Not even some tiny hares or stoats. They had been warned about bears, lynx, or even wolverine, but hadn't even seen the tracks of those creatures.

Odd, Oskar thought. It wasn't as if the weather had snowed them in. It was pleasant, cool to cold, but not freezing, and with the sun out, he felt a trickle of perspiration run down the center of his back.

Maja stopped, put her hands on her hips and turned to him. Her pretty face was flushed, making her eyes seem to glow as she looked down at him.

"Come on. Nearly there." She grinned as she examined him as Oskar struggled up to where she stood. "Do you need me to carry you?" Her grin widened.

"Would you?" he grinned back, and though he desperately would have liked to take a short break, he'd never admit it to the beautiful superwoman watching him.

They continued up the slope, their boots making grinding noises on the crushed gravel and splinters strewn on the path. He caught up to her and she pointed.

"What did this?"

Oskar shrugged. "Maybe an ice trail from last winter; it was a cold one. The weight of the ice must have crushed everything underneath it."

"Maybe." She nodded but didn't look convinced.

It took them another twenty minutes to reach the top, and together they walked out onto a rock platform to look down into the valley toward the placid green sea. Though the water looked enticing after

the hot climb, Oskar knew it was bone-chillingly cold. But what they came for was the scenery, and up here it was bracing, beautiful, and worth the arduous climb.

“Here. Right here,” she announced. “We will take our coffee.”

They set up their foldable chairs and brewed some hot water on a small butane stove. Maja broke out some traditional *sandbakelse* cookies shaped like reindeer, and they sat side by side, and stared out over the vista.

“I could stay here forever,” she said with a contented sigh. She then turned. “Could you?”

“With you? Yes,” he replied. “By myself, no.”

She stared at him for a moment, and he felt his cheek redden at his ham-fisted flirting. But after another moment she smiled and nodded and turned back to the view.

The pair sat looking out over the glacier shaped geography that fell sharply down to rivers and fjords. It was spring now but there was still some snow and ice in the cracks of the rock platform they sat on, and behind them some of the small mountains had crowns of white.

Oskar felt himself both cooling rapidly after the climb and also felt the bloom of warmth in his belly from the coffee to counteract it. Still, he lifted the collar of his jacket a little higher.

Maja turned slowly and tilted her head. At first, he thought she was just taking in more of the magnificent scenery, but then she turned to him with her brow knitted.

“Listen,” she said, and then turned back.

He did but wasn’t sure what she was referring to. “I don’t hear anything.”

“Exactly,” she scoffed. “There’s nothing. Not even a bird call.” She turned, giving him a frustrated-looking smile. “It’s spring, where is everybody?”

“Yeah, I guess.” He nodded slowly, sort of getting it. It was quiet but he had no idea if it was like this every year as he’d never been here before.

She was facing away from him, and then turned in her chair to look at something more closely on one of the opposite hills.

“That pathway. The one you thought might have been from ice trails crushing the ground.” She turned back. “Leads down there, and it doesn’t look natural, more like a trail.”

He followed her gaze and saw it did wend down the hillside and then over into an area that might have ended at a sheer rock face.

“That looks really strange. I want to check that out.” She turned back, her brows up.

He groaned, but inwardly. “Oh, you mean *we’re* going to check that out.”

He'd humor her, even though he was already feeling tired. He had a nice dinner planned for them, but he bet he'd end up falling asleep during the starter.

She flicked away the dregs of her coffee and stood, picked up her chair, and folded it back together with a snap. "Come on."

He sighed, did the same, and repacked his kit.

Together they then set off across the hill face, carefully navigating the steep slope as they followed the odd pathway. Looking down he was less convinced now it had been done by ice, as some of the crushed plant material looked only weeks if not days old. Obviously, the pulverizing was still going on even though the ice and snow had long gone.

In thirty minutes they crested the small rise that led to an area of tumbled boulders, and they saw that the sheer rock face had a large cave at its base. The crushed material had ended at the boulder line, but it had obviously been heading toward the dark opening.

For some reason it gave him the chills. "Do we really want to do this, because, you know, bears?" he asked.

"Pfft, we haven't even seen a hare." Maja had already pulled her flashlight and snapped it on and off to test it. "And you bet we do." She grinned. "This is so cool." She pointed the light into his face and flicked it on and off a few times. "You are getting sleepy, and now you will do as I say. Follow me-eeee..." She giggled.

He laughed softly at her dumb humor, but her quirkiness attracted him even more. He held his hands straight out in front of himself and took a few Frankenstein steps. "Lead on... *master*."

Maja went straight in and he rushed to keep up.

He wrinkled his nose – the cave was unnaturally large, and oddly warm inside. Also, it smelled weird, sulphury, and a little like fresh vomit.

Underfoot things crunched and Maja stopped and knelt to pick something up. She examined it for a moment and then turned to hold it out.

"This is a hoof. Maybe some sort of deer." She dropped it and wiped her hand on her trousers.

Oskar looked around, widening his beam and saw something larger. He went and picked it up. He shook his head and showed her. "This looks like part of a bear skull."

"So this is where the bears went," she whispered.

He sniffed it. "Phew, still smells. It's not that old." He turned slowly. "I don't think we should be in here."

Maja's light moved across the floor of the cave, and they saw more bones. A *lot* more bones. Her beam stopped on one in particular.

"Oh no," she whispered.

It was a human skull. And still fresh.
They heard something move behind them in the darkness.

Maja ran.

Ran for her life.

Ran almost blindly as her eyes were awash with tears, and she could taste bile and sour coffee in her mouth, and she knew she babbled incoherently.

Behind her Oskar frantically urged her on to greater speed. She knew he could have probably been way out in front of her, but he stayed behind her, shielding her, guarding her.

The thing had come out of the wall. But it was as big as, no, *bigger* than an elephant. Those yellow slitted eyes had opened, and it roared, making them both go weak at the knees. Their tiny flashlights could barely take it all in, but in one moment the huge thing was clinging to the wall of the cave, and then the next it was on them.

Now they knew what had happened to all the animals. They had stumbled into some sort of large carnivore's cave. A carnivore she had never seen or heard of in her life. But one thing she was sure of; it was a monster from her nightmares.

Maja put her head down and sprinted. They hadn't come that far down into the cave, and she saw light up ahead. But from behind she heard the sound of heavy clawed feet crushing the rocks and bones as the creature also increased its speed.

Oskar yelled to her again, "Don't. Look. Back. Don't..."

A sudden ground shaking thump and his scream made her stagger and her scalp tingle from fright. She couldn't help but turn and saw the thing had one large, clawed foot on Oskar's back.

It leaned its huge, scaled snout forward and opened a mouth lined with dagger long teeth. While Oskar flayed around, screaming, it gripped the top half of his body and with the sound of ripping tendons and flesh, it tore him in two. His clothing ripped, bones cracked, and blood spurted as his flesh also tore.

The upper half of his body was hanging in its mouth, and time seemed to stand still as for a brief few seconds in the beam of her light, she saw his face turned to her. The bleached white skin, eyes wide and teeth clamped in a rictus of pain and shock as it devoured him, chewing his body with relish.

He was still alive, her mind shrieked.

Maja let the vomit drip from her chin as she felt pinned to the spot. The massive creature then lowered its head for the second half of Oskar, and as his legs disappeared into its mouth, she felt her limbs unlock and she turned to run again.

She sprinted madly and just as she felt she was going to make it to

the light, something splashed her entire left side, from her shoulder and down her leg. Immediately, she heard the clothing begin to hiss and sizzle. Then the first spots that had found her bare neck and hand began with an excruciating pain, and she glanced down at her arm and hand that held the flashlight that was covered in a yellowish slime. She saw the material of her ribbed parka begin to fall away as if it was made of wet tissue paper.

She staggered on and out into the light. The pain was making her dizzy now. Just on the periphery of her consciousness she could hear the beast coming after her, but it seemed less important now.

Maja was forced to her knees as one of her legs wasn't working anymore and the flashlight clattered to the rocks. Did she drop it? Why?

She held up the hand that had held it, and saw the hand was just a red mess with the sticks of finger bones poking whitely from flesh that was retreating into a pulpy lump where her palm used to be.

Maja screamed so loud she tasted blood in her throat, but her voice didn't even sound like it came from a human being anymore as half of her body began to somehow rot down to a pile of sharp bones and liquefied flesh.

It was right behind her, and she fell face first onto the cold rocks, crushed plants, and gravel. She then heard the great beast begin to suck up her liquifying body and making small grunting noises of pleasure as it did.

As her vision darkened, she remembered she had told Oskar she wished they could stay here forever. She got her wish.

EPISODE 17

Sometimes our dreams of escape are far better than the actual escape

CHAPTER 03

Nemo's Cove, Lemuria, deep beneath Greenland

Anne Walsh put her hands on her hips and half turned. "It still floats; that's got to be a good sign, right?"

Troy Strom nodded. "It's at the top of my list." He grinned. "Followed by, seaworthiness, working engines, maneuverability, and no leaks."

Troy and Anne, plus a taciturn Elle Burgan, walked along the rock's edge of the grotto cave to take in the full shape of the vessel. Twenty feet up on a rock, legs crossed, Yrsa sat watching them. Or rather, just watching Troy.

He could feel her eyes on him and didn't know if this was because of some sort of blood oath she had taken to guard and protect him, seeing he had defeated her rival in battle. Or, she had some other designs on him.

Right now, he didn't care. He was thankful for her help and friendship. Also her tracking, hunting, and fighting abilities had saved them numerous times.

He stepped up onto a boulder and looked back at the craft – it was the most unusual design for a submarine he had ever seen in his life, and he knew now why the Lemurian Vikings had referred to it as the *jern fisk* – the iron fish.

Nemo seemed to have created it more with a mix of gothic design, and formidable defensive capabilities, and a huge fin at the rear made it seem like a giant shark resting in the underground grotto. There were also arcs of steel moving over the superstructure, that were covered in backward curving spikes, perhaps to put off large predators trying to take a bite out of it. However, they all added to an impression of a gigantic living sea creature rather than a machine.

Overall, it was around seventy-five feet in length, not very big, and he doubted there would be much space inside. *If* they could even get inside.

"If we're judging this by when Verne wrote the story, then this might have been here for nearly one-hundred-and-fifty years," Elle said, finally breaking her silence.

Troy nodded and plotted a path from the closest rocks to the sub and stepped carefully to where the rock ledge ended. Anne and Elle followed him.

He turned. "Give me a minute first. Just in case it's so corroded I fall right through."

Yrsa rose to her feet. "Be careful, Troyson." She watched him with

knitted brows.

Troy eyed the surface of the craft. It had rusted an orange-brown to the point it looked more like petrified wood than iron. But he thought at least it didn't look like the sheeting was corroded right through. He hoped.

He balanced for a moment and then leapt, landing on his toes and immediately going to one knee and using his hands to spread his weight. But the infrastructure not only held but felt strong and solid. He straightened, and then kicked at a few rivets and plate edges. "Seems good, very good."

"Coming over," Anne shouted and didn't wait for his approval but jumped to land almost right on top of him. Troy grabbed her to stop her continuing over the other side.

"Next time try and aim for the deck and not me." He chuckled.

Elle also leapt, but landed lightly and stood, placing her hands on her hips and looking along the submarine's skin. Yrsa had come closer, but once again sat on the edge of a rock watching them. But now also kept her eyes on the waters of the small bay they were in.

Troy briefly followed her eyes. They were in a grotto cavern, not high at about a hundred feet to the ceiling and two hundred feet around. It looked to continue further in, and he made a mental note to check it out in case Nemo had stored anything at the back they could use.

Looking over the side he saw the water was about fifty feet deep and he could see through to the weed-covered rocks and a few fish darting in and out. He also saw that weed was growing on the hull, and he bet there were beards of muscles, barnacles, and all sorts of growths attached to the Nautilus, and around the propellor shaft and rudder – not great, and if they were to steer the craft at all they would need to be removed. And Troy hated the idea of going diving in that primordial water again.

As he came back he saw Elle trying the hatch. She looked up with a red face. "Can't budge it. Must be frozen, rusted."

"Let me see," he said, and she stood back, and Troy gripped the hatch wheel.

He sucked in a breath and tried to turn it. Tried harder, and harder until he started to feel dizzy. He stood up, puffing heavily.

"Damn." He wiped the orange dust from his palms onto his thighs. "Did anyone bring an acetylene torch?"

There was a thump beside them that they all felt right through the soles of their feet, and the Nautilus rocked in the water. They spun to see Yrsa straightening and smiling down at them.

"I can try," she said, her ice blue eyes flashing with humor.

Troy inhaled, smelling the sweet musk of her from where she had

been picking a variety of small green berry, and then smearing herself with its heady scent.

It was obviously her choice of perfume, and when he had asked her why she had started to wear it, she simply tilted her head and asked did he like it. When he had said yes he did, she replied, *Then that is why I wear it.*

He grinned and stepped back. "Be my guest." He held both hands up, miming holding the wheel. "Turns *this way.*"

Anne laughed softly. "Yeah, come on girl power." She turned to Yrsa, practicing her ancient Viking language skills. "Show him who's boss."

"Boss?" she asked.

"Um, it means...." She tried again. "Show him who's the leader, who's in charge."

Yrsa still looked a little confused, but then pointed at Troy. "He is the leader."

Anne rolled her eyes and groaned. "Some girl power."

Troy laughed. "Come on, Yrsa; you can do it."

Yrsa was nearly eight feet tall, broad of shoulder, and had to get down low to grip the wheel. She closed her eyes for a moment, and her lips moved as Troy heard her calling on the All Father's strength as she breathed in and out deeply.

She then opened her eyes and began to exert her strength on the wheel. Her blue eyes near bulged and she bared her teeth, making a growling sound in her throat. But there came a tiny squeak from the wheel.

"Keep going," he urged.

Yrsa drew in an even deeper breath, and then tried again, harder. The muscles bulged in her arms, and this time she yelled as her face turned a deep, beet red. But sure enough, with a sound like an age-old vault being opened, the wheel began to turn. And then more, and then it spun.

She looked up, her eyes shining in her red face. "I loosened it for you...boss."

Troy stepped forward and placed a hand on her shoulder and rubbed it. "Well done." He then bent and gripped the wheel. "Here goes." He pulled. And nothing happened.

"One more time." He pulled again, harder, and with a screech of steel the hatch lifted.

There was a rush of air and Troy turned away, coughing. The others did the same and Yrsa put a hand over her nose and mouth.

"Phew, bad air," Troy said. "Let's give it a minute."

After a moment he lay on his belly and leaned in, switched on his flashlight, and shone it around.

“It’s dry, at least on this level.” He knelt up. “Anne, you’re with me. Elle and Yrsa, wait here.”

Yrsa nodded, and Elle frowned back at him but didn’t say a word.

Troy turned and climbed down the narrow ladder. He saw that the bars looked like bronze and were tarnished but not rusty. He stopped to briefly examine the hatch seals and saw that the rubberized compound was rotting now, but it had done its job to keep the salt air out, and therefore had kept the worst of the corrosion at bay.

He continued down with Anne following. On the metal gangway Anne shone her light one way and Troy the other.

“Stinks like a stagnant rock pool,” Anne’s nose crinkled, “that has an old car rusting in it.”

“And watch your head – low ceiling,” Troy added. “Let’s stick together. Just in case there is corrosion. I don’t want one of us falling through the floor if the other person isn’t with them.”

“Works for me,” Anne replied.

“Let’s see what shape the wheelhouse and control room is in.” He headed along the gangway, his feet clanking on the steel grating.

He shone his light around.

“They don’t make ‘em like they used to,” he said softly.

Even in the long steel corridor, Troy could see how Nemo had constructed a vessel that had futuristic functionality, while retaining the artistic beauty of a gothic mansion. There were panels of inlaid woods, ornately carved scrolls, cherubs, flowers, and spaced every six feet sticking from the wall were candlestick holders, but at their end was a form of bulky lightbulb.

He shone his light on one. “See that?”

“I did, and I thought lightbulbs were only invented by Thomas Edison long after Nemo was supposed to have built the Nautilus,” Anne remarked.

“That’s true,” Troy replied. “From what I remember, the first incandescent electric lamps were made by Thomas Edison in 1879; had a single loop of carbon which glowed when a current flowed through it. But looks like Nemo’s wonder machine made use of something similar or perhaps even more advanced, decades before. What a brilliant man he must have been.”

“Brilliant, sure,” Anne scoffed. “But he obviously didn’t feel the need to share any of his inventions or discoveries with the rest of the world.”

“According to other Verne stories, he built the Nautilus to sink warships. *All* warships. And he was a recluse,” Troy replied. “So, I don’t think he liked the rest of the world.”

They passed a few side rooms, and Troy managed to get one open. It was possibly crew quarters and was little more than a steel box.

There was something rotted on the floor that might have been the remains of canvas hammocks.

"I guess the crew didn't get the blue-ribbon accommodation," Anne said.

Troy pointed to a small metal table sticking out from the wall, with a bottle on it and two tin cups. "But looks like they did get their rum ration."

"Something's missing," Anne said. "Like, the guys who were supposed to be drinking the rum. Where are they?"

"Good question." Troy pulled back and continued toward the bow with Anne at his shoulder.

They came to a hole in the side of the floor with a ladder leading down, and Troy knelt to shine his light into it. "A tight squeeze down there; a little water, but not too bad. I'm assuming this leads to the engine room and maybe storage." He got to his feet. "We'll check that out next."

In a few moments they came to a formidable door that was locked tight. It wasn't a watertight hatch like on a normal submarine, but more a solid door you'd see on a mansion carved from oak or cedar and decorated in all manner of sea creatures.

Troy nodded. "The old boy certainly knew how to travel in style." He gripped the handle, but it wouldn't even turn a fraction. "Going to have to use the shoulder key."

He handed her his flashlight and took the handle in one hand, leaned back, and then surged forward, putting his shoulder into the door.

The oak was thick, but after a century and a half the lock gave first and then the door crunched inwards.

Troy held a hand out and Anne placed his flashlight in it. He then pushed the door all the way open while the hinges screamed and dropped flakes of rust to the floor.

Both flashlight beams quickly moved over the pitch-black room. There was a stunning array of instruments on pedestals, a couple with brass knobs and levers, and a huge chair facing a dark curved wall.

Troy approached and lay his hand on the back of the chair. He turned it around.

"*Shit.*" Anne jumped and her light wobbled a moment.

Troy scoffed. "Well, at least we now know he didn't get eaten."

Seated in the chair was a skeleton in a once royal blue naval sort of uniform complete with tassels on the shoulders. There was a brocaded cap on his head and the skeletal mouth hung open with the skull tilted to the side.

"Captain Nemo, I presume." Troy stood looking down at the skeleton for several moments, not sure what he was feeling – awe

maybe, because the story of the man had proved true.

"Nemo was real, the Nautilus was real, the Mysterious Island was real," he said as he looked at the remains of the man.

"It makes me wonder now what else we had once thought of as fiction is true," Anne said.

Troy turned to her, his brows raised. "Maybe there's a world at the center of the Earth. Or perhaps a table top mountain in South America where dinosaurs still exist."

He turned back. One thing was for sure, he was a believer now. And given what he had encountered in the waters while trying to regain the ruby, he thought it was highly likely that Nemo and the Nautilus had battled a giant squid. And maybe it was right here on this mysterious island that he had done it.

"Amazing." Anne had recovered from her shock at seeing the skeleton and leaned closer to peer at the remains. "Small man. I'm around five-seven, and he looks shorter than me."

Troy looked around. "Everything in here looks made for his size."

Anne examined the skull. "No signs of trauma, and I'd say by the teeth he was around sixty years old." She straightened. "Looks to me like he just sat here and decided to die."

"Perhaps he'd seen enough, done enough." Troy moved in front of the chair. "Excuse me, Captain." He looked briefly down at the controls and then lifted his gaze and saw that the dark curved wall in front of him had a layer of glass in front of it.

"Hey." He leaned forward, reading the words under some of the switches and levers. They were in French.

"My French is seriously rusty, but..." He frowned down at the words. "Propulsion, um, and..."

Anne joined him and pointed to each. "Thrust, canopy..."

"Wait, that one," Troy said and pressed the button. Nothing happened. "Damn, dead."

"Or maybe just not on." She pointed to a central button. "*Initiation.*"

He nodded and smiled. "Why not?" He pressed it, and a weak red light came on. It got stronger and brighter. "You've got to be kidding."

"How is that possible in a machine from the mid 1800s?" Anne asked. "They were still using steam and sail."

"Good question. I mean, what could be the power source?" He shrugged. "Gas would have long leaked away. Steam from boilers would have dissipated. Even today's batteries would be long corroded by now, and I doubt even Nemo could harness nuclear power."

"He used something else," Anne replied. "Worth checking out."

"Sure is." He reached forward. "But first..." He pressed the button for the canopy again. A light came on and the metal shielding in front of them that had been protecting the glass groaned, shuddered, and

then it slid back with a heavy clanking sound.

“Wow and wow.” Anne clapped her hands.

Looking out through the sea-moss-stained glass revealed the mouth of the grotto and was just about eye-level on the water of the cave lagoon’s surface. They saw the water was dark in the cave and then went to a magnificent silvery-blue when the wintery light outside reached it.

Troy looked down at the console, running his eyes across the controls and trying to get an idea of their uses. He stopped at one that had a large switch and also a lever with numbers from 0 to 5 on it.

He turned to her. “*Propulsion*. Guess it’s the same in French.” His hand hovered over the switch. “What do you think?”

“I think it’s wishful thinking, but...” She shrugged, “...if you don’t try it you’ll never know.”

He reached forward and flicked the large switch. There was silence for a moment and just as he was about to switch it off and then back on, there came a small hum from somewhere deep within the vessel.

“Unbelievable,” Troy whispered, once again marveling at Nemo’s engineering prowess.

A small green light appeared on the console next to where it indicated the speed rate at a level of zero.

“A test,” he said, and gently pushed the lever forward. The light moved to be next to the number 1, but there was no motion. The engine whine got louder but that was all. In another second a red light blinked on the console, with the word ‘*Attention*’ on it.

“*Okay, okay, I get it,*” he said, and eased back on the power lever.

“*What’s going on up there?*” It was Elle’s voice from back along the steel corridor.

“Sorry,” he shouted and then turned back to the controls. “As I suspected, the propellor is probably long crusted over.” He shut the engines down. “But, we have power from somewhere. And I’m feeling confident.”

“It floats, but is it seaworthy?” Anne asked. “We have a long way to go in freezing water, in a steel ship that’s a century and a half old.”

“I know,” he said. “Let’s update the others with what we’ve found, and then we can investigate the power source.” He raised his eyebrows. “My curiosity is killing me.”

Troy and Anne moved quickly back along the steel corridor and stopped under the hatch. Elle was already up there, and her face was in the circle above them. Behind her loomed the large head of Yrsa with her white plaits hanging down from each side of her head.

“There was a weird noise, and I thought it was coming from outside,” Elle said. “But it was coming from inside. I mean, how the hell is it still working?”

“And that’s the million-dollar question and one I want the answer to,” Troy replied.

Elle leaned in. “It’s my turn to explore,” Elle said. “Anne gets to wait here this time.”

“What?” Anne stepped in front of him, with her brows snapped together. “Hey, listen, you’re still on probation as far as I’m concerned, and...”

Troy sighed. “Come on, Anne, let Elle do this one. You got to go first. Besides, if this works out we’ll all be in here together for quite some time.”

“Draw straws,” Anne threw in.

“No, it’s decided,” Elle said and slid down the ladder. She tried to straighten to her full height but couldn’t. “Snug in here.”

Yrsa lowered her head inside the hatch and looked around.

“I’m not so sure, Yrsa,” Troy said. “You might get stuck.”

She nodded, and then lifted her eyes to Troy. “Will the *jern fisk* take you home?”

“It might,” he replied. “If we can get it working.”

She nodded, but her mouth turned down. “Then I’m happy for you.”

Troy looked up with his hands on his hips. “You and Anne keep watch while Elle and I check out the engine room.”

“Troyson,” Yrsa said. “We need to go hunting again. The food is nearly gone.”

“Yeah, you’re right. We’ll check things out down below and then we can go hunting,” Troy agreed. “Sound good?”

“Just you and me. We are the fastest,” she said. “That will be my turn.” Her blue eyes shone.

“Sure, fine,” Troy replied.

Yrsa looked to Anne and then lowered one long brown arm.

Anne muttered a few ripe curses and stepped toward the hatch. “Guess that’s my ride.” She gripped Yrsa’s hand, and the giant Viking woman pulled her out with ease.

Anne and Yrsa vanished, and Elle turned to him. “She still doesn’t trust me.”

“I still don’t trust you,” he replied.

“I think you do. But if you want to keep up the act for Anne, then that’s fine with me.” Her green eyes glinted, with the real one casting a few fiery sparks. “I think if I get the chance, I’ll prove who I really am.”

“Until then.” He turned and waved her on. “Now, let us see what’s powering the Nautilus after all this time. My curiosity is slaying me.”

Elle let Troy lead the way as they headed toward the rear, and then came to another of the drop holes with a ladder. Troy slid down first

and waited for her. The tall athletic woman arrived in seconds more.

Together they moved along the dark, steel corridor in a crouch, and as Elle edged toward the end, she felt her jaws begin to ache.

"You feel that?" Troy asked as he touched his cheek.

"I do," she replied as they came to the last steel door. "In my back teeth and behind my eyes."

He placed his hand on the lever latch. "Ready?"

"Oh yeah," she replied and stood to the side.

Troy turned back and pushed on the lever. As expected, the door was age-sealed shut but holding the handle down he put his shoulder into it, and the door loudly grated open.

The first thing they noticed was that it was warm, very warm, inside the fortified chamber. The room had a large round object or mechanism at its center, that was sealed. Pipes ran from its sides and headed off into the ship at various angles.

"So, where's the engines?" Elle asked.

Troy panned his light beam around the room, but there was little else beside the central chamber. He looked back at it.

"I think whatever is in there, must be it." He crossed to it and bent to rap on it with his knuckles. "Could be lead. Hopefully that means it's not radioactive." He then let his open palm hover over it. "But that's where the heat is coming from."

Elle crouched beside it and saw that on one side were large metal hinges and on the other a latch, so she guessed the thing would open a little like a totally round clam shell.

Troy gripped one of the locking braces. "Give me a hand here."

Elle helped him unlock the round container, and then gripped the two handles on its top.

"Ready?" he asked.

She nodded. "On three, two, one, go."

They lifted. It was heavy; damn heavy. And then with a pop and the grind of old steel, the lid came up.

It immediately filled the room with a soft red glow, and Troy pushed the rounded lid all the way up where a latch held it in place.

"Oh my God," Elle breathed as she stared into the device.

Troy chuckled softly. "He harnessed them. That mad, brilliant man worked out a way to use their energy."

Elle squinted her good eye and felt the ache from her eye, right through to the back of her skull. She stared at the containment chamber's contents – it held four red rubies nestled around a central mass of what looked like black soil run through with silver thread. There were small mirrors around the underside, perhaps like photoelectric cells catching and reflecting whatever rays came off the huge rubies.

“He used them to power the ship.” Elle looked up with her brows knitted. “But when he left here, left the island, why didn’t they hatch as Anne has said they would?”

Troy leaned into the device and used his flashlight to dig into the central pile of soil. “Because I think he knew that whatever is in this soil keeps them as rubies. See, that’s soil from right here, and looking at those silver streaks running through it, I’m betting Anne would tell us it’s probably concentrated iridium.”

“I still don’t believe that.” She leaned back from the heat and held a hand up in front of her face. “Lead. That’s what the lid has to be made of. Better shut it as I think iridium is very radioactive and I have no idea what it could be doing to us being so close to it.”

Troy did as she suggested, and immediately felt a little relief from the warm red rays and the weird silver-streaked soil.

Elle stood and stepped back, rubbing her good eye, and Troy wiped his brow. He nodded and smiled broadly. “So, looks like we still have power, and we need to ensure it’s sea worthy.” He turned about. “I think we’ll need to defoul the prop and shaft, but if we get that working, well...” He hiked his shoulders and held his arms wide.

“Then we’re out of here,” Elle replied and grabbed one of his outstretched hands. She attempted to pull him into some sort of embrace, but he let her hand go. She half smiled. “Still not there, huh?”

“Let’s not complicate anything and just work on getting home first.” Troy tilted his head.

“And then what?” she asked.

“Seriously?” He shook his head. “Come on, Elle, you shot me. And then left us here to die. I appreciate you’re telling me you’re with us all the way now, but the wounds are still too deep and fresh for me to trust you just yet.”

“That wasn’t me, Troy. One day I hope you’ll let me...” She saw the expression on his face and stopped talking to hold her hands up. “Okay, okay.” She lowered them. “But I’m here, if...”

“I know, sure.” He turned away. “Come on.”

She watched him go for a second or two and felt a flash of anger at the rebuff. After another second she followed, her jaw set in a line.

Troy and Elle climbed out of the hatch, and she saw Yrsa and Anne sitting together. For some reason she didn’t like the thought of them teaming up.

“That’s a good sign,” he said.

“Practicing her old Viking,” Elle replied. “About time we all understood each other.”

“I agree.” Troy opened his arms when he got close to Anne and Yrsa. “I’ve got good news, and other news that’s not so good,” he said.

“Start with the good. Tell me it’s working,” Anne said.

He nodded. “It is. Sort of. There’s a power source and it’s still viable,” he replied.

Her brows came together. “Yeah, but sort of? How can any *sort* of power source we know sit idle for around one hundred and fifty years and still be working?”

“You might not believe this but there are four of the rubies in some sort of cradle that are having their energy harnessed,” he replied. “And for the egg theorists, they have a pile of the iridium-infused dirt at the center to maybe stop them hatching.”

“I am so going to check that out next time I’m in there.” Anne got to her feet. She folded her arms. “So, now what’s the other news?”

“Propellor won’t turn,” Elle said. “Which I think should have been expected after all this time.”

Anne exhaled. “So, someone has to dive to clean and clear it.”

Troy nodded. “Yep.”

Anne’s eyes slid to Elle. “Let her do it.” She stepped forward at the look from Troy to Elle. “We only have one dive mask. And she’s strong enough. And besides, she’s always saying she’s going to prove her honesty and value to us. This is a great way to do it.”

“Fine with me,” Elle said and smiled sweetly back at Anne, knowing it would burn her up.

“Look, it might take us hours or days to clear the prop and get it working. If we even can. That’ll mean we’ll be taking shifts. So maybe we’ll all get a turn,” he replied.

Troy looked about. “Okay, let’s not waste any time. Seems safe in there, so I want you two to do a thorough search for anything else we can use – maps, weapons, anything. Also, clean the front viewing glass – that can be done without going in the water.”

“You will need food.” Yrsa got to her feet, a small smile curving her lips.

“We sure will. Yrsa and I will gather some supplies now. At least to stock us while we’re working on the Nautilus.” He looked about. “It’s mid-day; we’ll be back in a few hours. We can even stay in the grotto or onboard.” He looked from the hatch to the broad shoulders of Yrsa. “Maybe.”

Yrsa gathered her things, lifting her large hunting spear.

Troy set off to the path leading out. He paused and turned. “And you two, try really hard to work together. We’ll need to act as a team to survive and get home. Deal?”

“Yes, Daddy.” Anne gave him a theatrically wide grin.

Troy laughed and shook his head, and then headed off with the huge form of Yrsa following.

Elle smiled as she watched them go.

Yrsa and Troy headed back along the cliff pathway, climbing to the grass plain at the top. Just before they reached it, Yrsa slowed him, put her finger to her lips, and together they peered over the edge.

Troy knew why; everywhere was dangerous, and what was safe one day, or one hour, could be deadly the next.

He still had his handgun with just two bullets remaining. And he promised himself it was only for the most life-threatening emergencies. Until then he would use snares, a spear, and his hunting knife. And one more thing – a bow and arrow. Troy had become very proficient with one.

There were plenty of trees with strong wood for the bow, and to make arrows that held their straightness, but he had only partially mastered the art of cleaning, twining, and stretching animal gut to make the bow strings. And Anne's historical knowledge of ancient civilizations had come in handy, advising him on the best trees and best parts of animals to use. She had told him that bowstrings were once made from sinew, twisted rawhide, gut, hemp, flax, or silk. Today, strings for wooden longbows were often made of linen thread. But on this mysterious island it was go old school or nothing.

The only thing he hadn't quite mastered was the arrow tips. He had taken to using sharpened stone chips. But they tended to break off in tough animals or become dislodged.

He remembered from his time in the Viking village he had seen that the Vikings had mastered smelting, and probably used what was called bog iron, a form of impure iron deposit that develops in bogs or swamps by the chemical oxidation of iron carried in the muddy solution. It was easy to work and was what gave the Vikings their swords and axe heads.

Yrsa had watched him use the bow and arrow and thought it too flimsy to be a useful weapon, but agreed her people could make better tips, and they might be of value if they were bigger.

Troy promised to make one for her one day, but for now it didn't matter, because when he and an experienced huntress like Yrsa were working together, they never came home empty handed.

He hefted his pack a little higher – he had little left of his belongings that he arrived on the island with. His pack was now a woven bag, and other than the gun, the only thing he kept was a wristwatch, an old Seiko dive watch given to him by his father. It had a blue face and luminous numbers, but the little hands had stopped long ago. He kept it as a reminder of his dad, of home, and maybe of the passing of time itself.

"We will enter the forests, there." Yrsa pointed. "We follow beside the trail, not on it."

He nodded, knowing why – the ambush predators also liked trails; they'd hang back in the forest, and with their camouflage plumage or scales would be invisible as they stood stone still and waited for some oblivious creature to come blundering along. He'd seen it and witnessed its deadly results on animals and people.

They crossed the small plain at a crouch and entered the forest. Yrsa paused just inside the green gloom to snatch a few handfuls of berries from a bush and handed some to Troy.

She squatted and he beside her. She pushed them into her mouth and the juice made her lips crimson. He ate as well and loved the slightly acidic taste of apple and raspberry.

She looked around quickly. "We are safe here for now."

"Good," he said, eating the last of the berries, and smiled at her.

Yrsa stared for a moment, her almost luminous eyes in the semi darkness as she looked deep into his eyes. She reached out with one hand to cup his chin and used a thumb to wipe away some berry juice.

"Thanks, Mom." He smiled at her, but her face remained serious, eyes unblinking in their intensity.

She left her hand there, holding his chin. All he could focus on was her large eyes that seemed to glow in her brown face, framed by the long white braided plaits that were strung with beads, colored cloth, bones, and some flowers.

She wore more and more of them in her hair, and he wondered if she did that for him after he had told her once he liked it.

While still cupping his chin she leaned forward while pulling him toward her. Her lips were over his, kissing him, and he kissed her back. He could smell her rawness and taste the berries in her mouth. He couldn't help it; he was intoxicated.

Her large tongue moved in his mouth, and when she finally broke from the kiss, she was breathing heavily and saying his name softly and other words that hinted at love.

They fumbled with each other's clothing, and in seconds more she was on her back, and he was rising up over her. This time he rode her, and never in his life had he felt such passion and lust, and never wanted it to end.

His pace quickened, and she put her hand over her mouth to stop herself crying out – too much noise was a danger here, and he had to check his own roar as he exploded inside her.

Troy lay on top of her breathing heavily, sweat soaked and sated. He went to roll off, but she held him in place, stroking his hair and whispering soft words to him.

She leaned her head close to his ear. "You're mine now, Troyson, son of Strom." She finally let him slide from her. "Forever."

CHAPTER 04

Portugal, Lisbon, Northern Cascais, grotto area

The warming weather had brought the tourists back. In the northern seas, it was shrinking the sea ice, and opening up more and more once iced-locked areas.

The warm sea corridors of Lemuria were working again, and some creatures took advantage of the highways to search for less competitive and more abundant food sources.

Some became stranded in freezing water and died. But others sometimes found a new home. And thrived.

Andrej Bodega and Cleo Almarez guided their sailing sloop into the grotto-like cove. They were several miles up from Cascais' beaches and away from the growing crowds. The water was warming, and the sun was just starting to get some heat back into it, heralding a long hot Portuguese summer to come.

Both Andrej and Cleo were late forties, comfortably well off, and joint owners of a design company in Lisbon that specialized in a range of fine porcelain and silver-plated tableware that was in all the hippest shops around the world.

"*Perfecto*," Cleo said as Andrej slowed the boat. The sail was rolled, and as he had the engines just moving slowly, the sharp polished hull barely caused a ripple on the azure water's surface.

Cleo looked over the side, and saw the water here had hints of blue and green like polished glass and was so clean she could see the bottom that might have been five feet deep or fifty. The cliffs surrounding them were hung with vines dotted with purple flowers, and a few tiny birds shot in and out of their flowing tresses, either sipping nectar or chasing an insect meal.

"This will do," Andrej said, and stopped the engines.

He let the boat glide another few feet and then pressed the button on the console and the anchor chain fed out. It fell about twenty feet to the weed-covered bottom and held fast.

The warm weather meant they wore very little – Andrej in shorts and bare feet, and Cleo in t-shirt and a bikini bottom.

Andrej came down to the foredeck and put his hands on his hips and looked about, smiling broadly. "Our secret hideaway." He felt the warm sun on his shoulders and inhaled deeply, drawing in the scent of drying salt on rocks, sunshine on the wood of the deck, and also just the hint of vanilla and citrus from the blooms hanging close by.

"In here, no time, and anytime, is the right time." He grinned at her.

He then let his gaze drop to Cleo's buttocks as she leaned over the side looking at fish or something she had spotted. He smiled; her figure still turned his head and made his heart race.

She turned. "Champagne and dinner on deck tonight."

"Delicious." He smiled and nodded and held out his hand to her. She saw the look in his eyes and also couldn't miss the way his shorts were now tented – she knew exactly what sort of entrée he had in mind.

Cleo smiled, crossed to him, gently swinging her hips, and took his hand. He kissed it and then guided her quickly below deck.

Cleo was still down in their cabin deciding what cotton dress to wear that married chic and sexy, with the warm climate. She also wanted to show off her nicely sun browned shoulders.

She sat in front of the mirror and smiled as she applied lipstick. No doubt about Andrej, he was still devilishly handsome and still had that spark. She smiled; and could still make her scream in her passion.

The boat rocked slightly and then she had to shoot a hand out to catch her lipstick that tried to roll off the table. Odd, she thought, as in the cove the water was glass smooth. Maybe another boat went past, she thought.

Please keep going, she wished.

When she finished, she stood, looked at her sandals, and then decided against them. There was nothing like the feel of still warm deck wood under her feet.

She headed up; the sun was just going down, and the lighting was twilight – romantic, and the air was warm.

She expected to see Andrej tossing the shrimp salad or holding out a couple of frosted champagne flutes. But as she stood in the cabin doorway, instead of spotting her husband she seemed alone, and only heard a strange grunting sound.

The deck tilted a little more.

"Andrej?" she asked, still smiling, and came up out of the cabin to stand on deck. "Andr..."

Her eyes went wide at the sight. Andrej was wrestling with something. Something that was coming up over the side of the boat that was a mottled green, or black, or brown, as it seemed to change color in rippling waves.

Stovepipe-thick, muscular tentacles wrapped around his neck and face, muffling him to little more than grunts, as he clung on tight to the railing with both hands.

Andrej was six foot tall and a powerful man, but whatever held him was enormous and was winning the battle. She glanced over the side, and in the growing darkness saw an enormous body, and what might

have been a hard shell-like rear end that was as long as their boat.

The most horrifying aspect was a dinner plate-sized eye swiveled from Andrej toward her. And it saw her. And then close to where she stood there was the wet slap of something that was growing over the railing – another tentacle – and this one was coming for her.

Andrej let out a few more muffled grunts and she saw his face turned to her and saw him looking at her. His eyes were so full of fear, it made her heart break.

Cleo took a step toward her husband, just as with one more almighty tug he was lifted over the side and with a splash disappeared into the water.

The creature sunk down, the mottled tentacles flushing with color as if in delight at winning its prize.

Cleo backed down the steps, her mind almost short-circuiting with indecision, confusion, and abject horror.

The thing had taken Andrej – *help him*, her mind screamed. She rushed back up to peer over the side.

The darkness was crowding in on her now, but within the clear water, she could still make out the massive shape of the thing on the weed-covered sea bottom, spread out like a gigantic, mottled rug. And this time there was a cloud of spreading discoloration, and she just knew it wasn't ink but blood. And then she also knew, it was eating him alive.

She put her hands to her head, trying to think.

"Bastard!" she screamed and rushed back below deck, wishing she had a rifle, or even a speargun. She stopped and her head came up. "Call someone." But the radio was on the top deck.

She went to head top side when the ship tilted again, and as she got to the doors she looked out on to the foredeck now only lit by the moon and stars. She saw the creature, lifting itself so its head was level with the deck railing and those huge saucer-shaped goat-slitted eyes were searching, searching for her.

Their boat was tilting precariously now, and the thing was bigger and heavier than she imagined. Was it heavier than the boat? Could it pull it under, sink it?

Cleo stopped, holding tight to the door frame; the radio, the anchor controls, and even the engine and steering were up on the next level, and she knew if she went up there, the monster would grab her. And if it could take a man the size of Andrej, then what chance would she have?

"Andrej," she whimpered, and felt bile rise in her throat at the thought of the slimy thing grabbing her and dragging her over the side and into the water to do to her what it did to her poor husband.

She knew a little about octopus and squids, she'd eaten plenty, and

knew they had mouths like giant parrot beaks underneath them, nestled in the center of all those arms, and something this big would have a monstrous one made for tearing flesh and breaking bones.

She backed down the steps.

She'd wait it out. It would get bored soon. She remembered reading once that large predator animals couldn't count. So, if there were two things, and one of them hid while the other ran, then they thought all of them had run away.

She decided; she would stay still and quiet. She had a bottle of water, and that would last her for a day at least.

Cleo closed the doors and locked them.

She looked out through one of the small portholes, and from the angle could only just make out the side of the thing as it clung to the hull of the boat.

Cleo switched off the lights, sat down cross-legged on the floor and closed her eyes. She wouldn't move, wouldn't make a sound.

Tomorrow, I'll be free, she prayed.

Cleo blinked open sticky eyes, feeling groggy and dazed.

Five days later, it was still there.

Once, she had woken to see that huge dinner plate-sized eye staring in through the porthole.

It never forgot her. It was never going away. From time to time the door had rattled and creaked as a huge weight was pushed up against it. Plus, massive suckers had attached to the porthole, and she knew it was trying to pull the glass out.

But that wasn't all of the nightmares inflicted upon her. Another time Andrej had appeared at the small window in the cabin door. It wasn't Andrej, of course. It was just his head and face, ripped from his body with ribbons of flesh dangling from the stump of his neck and his ghastly eyes rolled back and mouth gaping in a silent moan of pain and horror.

It was playing with her, making a puppet of her husband's skull, or perhaps really thinking it could entice her out by pretending he was still alive, and calling to her.

Cleo had wept as she heard wood splintering above her, and she remembered something else about octopus – they were incredibly smart and if you gave one a puzzle, like a sealed bottle with a crab in it, it would work on the problem for hours, days, until it got the crab out.

And right now, she was the crab, and her cabin was the bottle.

Cleo stood. She had no food or water left. If she waited any longer one of two things was going to happen: the monster would finally work out how to pull her out of her hiding place like that crab from

the bottle. Or being so long without food she'd be too weak to even try to be able to escape.

Cleo had at first entertained the idea of somehow jumping over the side and swimming to the rocks – it wasn't far, maybe just two hundred feet. But she knew she wasn't a fast swimmer, and she bet the thing could move underwater ten times faster than her.

She shuddered at the thought of the thing's tentacles wrapping around an ankle and slowly pulling her under. And while down there still struggling for breath those powerful, suckered arms gently handed her to the snapping beak.

Maybe it would also rip her head off and make both her and Andrej talk to each other like gruesome finger puppets.

Cleo squeezed her eyes shut and shook her head to chase away those gruesome images. She sucked in a deep shuddering breath; bottom line, she needed a few minutes alone up on deck, to release the anchor line and start the engines. Then full throttle out of the bay.

It was morning now, and she glanced at the small clock – 6am.

"No time and anytime, is the right time," she whispered, remembering Andrej's words when they first arrived in what they thought was their paradise.

Cleo went to the porthole first on one side of the cabin then the other – there was nothing but smooth, green tinted water.

Up on her toes she crept to the doors but stopped to grab the fire axe from the wall and hefted it. It was heavy, but new and sharp as a razor. Just holding it made her feel braver and safer.

There was also one of the flare gun boxes and she flipped the lid up, grabbed the stubby gun and one of the flare-plugs. She loaded the gun and then jammed it into the waistband of her shorts.

Cleo stood hyperventilating for a few moments, before feeling a sense of calm wash over her.

"Fuck you, monster," she hissed and pushed the doors open.

Four days later the Lisbon Maritime Police found the boat still anchored in the small cove. It was empty. But the topside structure was severely damaged. The wooden deck planks were ripped up, and much of the metal railing on one side was completely torn away.

They also found a flare burn mark inside the wheelhouse, and more alarmingly, a fire axe embedded in one of the walls.

But that was it.

The ship's record stated that there were two occupants, neither were onboard, and neither were floating bodies close by or on the rocks.

The police sent down divers and found no bodies and nothing of interest, other than an eight-foot-wide drag mark on the cove's bottom, as if something heavy had been pulled in and then back out of

the grotto.

The official report stated that it could have been misadventure, or even piracy. The case would be kept open pending any more information becoming available. But no one onboard the Police boat really expected to see the couple, live or dead, again.

CHAPTER 05

Nemo's Cove, Lemuria, deep beneath Greenland

Troy and Yrsa returned, and over the huge Viking woman's shoulder was some sort of biped animal. The thing would have been about three feet tall and had a now sagging frilled collar of skin that flared red and orange when it was alive.

Troy carried a small woven bag of some sort of berries. He held it up.

"The hunters return."

Elle smiled and nodded. "About time; we're starving."

As Yrsa and then Troy passed by, Anne sniffed and then stared for a moment or two, her eyes going from Yrsa to Troy, and then back to Yrsa.

Anne tilted her head. "You look happy, Yrsa," she said in her own version of the woman's language.

Yrsa nodded. "Yes, a good hunt."

"I'll bet." Anne then turned to Troy, with her eyes narrowed. "And I can smell that you've taken to wearing Yrsa's berry perfume as well now, Mr. Strom."

Troy snorted. "No, ah, but thankfully Yrsa was there to pull me out of a sinkhole. She had to grab me and drag me out."

"Really?" One of Anne's eyebrows went up and she turned to Yrsa.

"Which sinkhole was that, Troyson?" Yrsa asked.

Elle laughed out loud.

Anne just swore under her breath and looked at him from under lowered brows.

"Okay, whatever." Troy frowned. "What did you discover in your search? Anything useful or interesting?"

Elle stepped aside, showing him the pile of rotted clothing, fragments of maps, and tin cans with holes in them.

"There was an armory, but its weapon's stocks were some colt revolvers and Springfield model rifles. But their ammunition was long corroded and unusable. However, there were racks of harpoons, both heavy and light. They could still be of use."

"Good, we can use them now for defense." Troy added, "Anything else?"

Elle bent to pick up one of the parchments. "A map of the island. Most is unreadable, but I'd say it was copied from the one Yrsa has." She held it up, holding the top and bottom edge. "As you would expect from a seaman like Nemo, the coastline and waterways are a little more detailed. Or what we can see of them."

Troy came and peered at the map, tracing the Mysterious Island's coastline with a finger, noting the inlets, cliffs, and coastal plain, and also the mighty cave walls surrounding the entire island.

"Damn, still only one exit – Odin's Gate – I was hoping there might be another way," he said.

"It's warmer now." Elle lowered the map. "Odin's Gate is open again. Or should be."

"All we need is a way to sail through it," Anne added. "Plus, I found a storage cubicle with several of these." She held up a strange looking box with what could be a lamp on one end. "Watch this." On the side of the box was a turning crank wheel which she wound up, creating a *zizzing* noise, and as she did, the lamp glowed soft orange, and then brightened.

"You're kidding." Troy grinned. "After one-hundred-and-fifty years."

"A Ruhmkorff lamp," Anne said. "These are beyond antique, and an early form of portable electric light. The lamp has an internal Geissler tube that gets energized by a battery powered Ruhmkorff induction coil. It was used by miners... and explorers. There were several of them."

"That's magnificent," Troy said. "We can use those. Keep that one here." Troy turned away. "Things are coming together." He walked closer to the rock's edge and looked down into the water. "So, all we need to do is get the Nautilus working again."

The grotto cave's waters looked to be quite deep, at least fifty feet – good for clearance for the Nautilus, but bad because deeper water meant bigger predators could come in. But at least it was clear and walking along the rocks he could spot things most of the way to the grotto's entrance.

He turned. "Okay, here's the plan. I'm going to go down first shift and check out the prop shaft to get an idea of what we're up against."

Yrsa lay a hand on his shoulder, her brows knitted. "Troyson, I would not go in that water."

He looked up at her. "I don't particularly want to either. But I need to see if we can get the *jern fisk* working. I can only see if it's possible to do that from down there. But that's where my trusty crew and their harpoons will come in handy. I want two harpooners to be on the rocks, looking out for me. And one more person holding a rope attached to me to give it a tug if danger is coming."

"I'll do the rope." Anne thumbed at the other women. "She-Hulk and cyclops can be your harpooners."

"Cyclops, *huh?*" Elle laughed. "No offence taken."

Yrsa was unfazed, undoubtedly not getting the name calling. But Troy knew the huge huntress was always going to be his number one choice to be a harpooner.

Troy stripped down just to his boxer shorts, although by now they were little more than rags hanging from a fraying piece of elastic around his waist.

He knelt to pull out their last dive mask and took his belt and buckled it at his waist and put the knife in the sheath. It was really only there for comfort, and his first and second line of defense would be his harpooners, and the rope at his waist as an early warning system which he picked up and tied it to his belt. At around seventy feet it should be more than long enough. He handed the end to Anne.

“Okay,” he said.

“Good luck,” Anne said.

He nodded, and then turned. “Harpooners ready?”

Elle lifted hers, one of the shortest, at about six feet long with a metal tip. Yrsa stamped her huge eight-foot-long weapon on the ground like a member of the pretorian guard. He could see that her eyes held a hint of fear in them.

“I stand ready,” she said. And then softer, “I do not like the water.”

“Me either. Now.” He looked back to the shadowy grotto’s surface. Without light from above, it was darker than it should be. He still remembered the attack from the weird octopus thing, and really hoped it had moved off somewhere else and there wasn’t another one living in here.

Troy sighed. “Okay.” He’d put it off long enough, and he eased down the rocks and slid into the water. He bobbed back to the surface and pulled the mask down. He sucked in a breath and then dived down to the rear of the Nautilus.

The water was clear and as he experienced before, warmer than the outside air temperature. He stroked to the rear of the ancient submarine, came up, took in another big breath, and then dived deeper.

Troy pulled himself along the vessel and as expected, saw that the propellor and shaft were heavily encrusted with beards of mussels, barnacles, and other dangling sea-growths. He immediately set to work using his knife to cut away the kelp and mollusks, but the barnacles and oysters were on tight, and he knew he’d never be able to dislodge them just with his knife and bet all he’d do is skin his knuckles and then put blood in the water; the last thing he wanted.

After a few dives where he was able to remove all the soft weed, he swam back to his waiting team. He pushed his mask up. “I need one of the smaller harpoons. I’ve cut away the easy stuff, but I need to bring in some heavier artillery.”

Elle handed him her harpoon, and then jumped down onto the deck of the Nautilus and dropped into the hatch. Troy guessed she was probably going to get another harpoon for herself.

"Is it good, Troyson?" Yrsa knelt at the rock's edge, staring down at him.

"I think I'm making progress." He grinned up at her. "Good as can be expected after around one-hundred-and-fifty years."

"I don't like the water, but I can come down with you if you need me," she said. "I'm sure I can hold my breath a long time."

"Thanks." He held the harpoon up. "This will do the job for now. You keep watch for any sharks or anything else. I don't want something sneaking up on me." Troy nodded to her, pulled his mask back down and turned to dive again.

This time he used the harpoon to jab and scrape the barnacles free. He tried to be as silent as he could manage, but there was just no getting around using the iron tip of the harpoon on the iron propellor and shaft.

But he was making good progress and sometimes huge slabs of shells were sloughed away to fall to the bottom. He continued to jab, twist, and scrape, and soon there was a cloud of silt around him, and an avalanche of shell debris falling to the bottom to nestle in amongst the seaweed.

Troy had to continually return to the surface to gulp more air, before going back down for another two-minute burst of work on the shaft.

After an hour he ran a hand over the propellor and where it threaded in to the stern hull. *Nearly there*, he thought, and returned to the surface and handed up the harpoon.

Time for the fine detail work and he ducked back down, and this time used his knife again to file away at the last of the shell debris to ensure the propellor could turn smoothly.

It was from the corner of his eye that he caught the movement. He stopped and hung in the water, watching. And then floated in closer to the hull to shield himself.

He saw the movement again. This time his eyes were able to capture it, and he saw exactly what it was. It was like a huge patch of the sea bottom had decided to move a little closer to investigate.

It was a stingray looking like a gigantic, mottled rug, perhaps drawn by the scent of the smashed mollusks. He marveled at its size, as it was easily twenty feet around, flattened, but the front part was like a hard shell, and the rear was a little like the tail of a normal fish. It was obviously some long gone species that managed to avoid extinction like so many other of the weird creatures in this hidden world.

There were no spikes on its tail, and from experience he knew rays were mostly harmless and he watched, fascinated by the huge prehistoric-looking creature. He wished Anne could see it as he bet she'd be able to tell him what its name was and how old it was. After

the encounter with the shark, she had told him sharks and rays had been around for nearly 400 million years and were the absolute survivors when it came to avoiding the mass extinctions from the past.

He watched it glide even closer. He was spellbound by its grace as he bet it made near zero turbulence. It stopped a dozen feet from him, hesitating, and the eyes on top looked up at him.

Troy waved and thought, *It's okay, buddy, I'm a friend...*

The massive harpoon shot down into the water and speared the creature in the back, pinning it to the bottom.

Ah, dammit. Yrsa had obviously spotted it approaching him and decided to take no chances.

The stingray yanked itself from the sea bottom and flapped awkwardly away with the huge spear still embedded right through it, and now trailing a cloud of blood.

And then of course the sharks came, attracted by the scent and the agitation in the water.

There was several of them, all about ten feet in length, and with those same weird anvil-type fins on their backs – *Stethacanthas*, Anne had told him – and they wasted no time attacking the stingray.

Even under the water, Troy could hear the ripping and tearing as huge chunks of meat were torn from the injured animal.

The rope at his waist began to be tugged as Anne was giving him the signal there was danger.

No shit, he thought, and allowed himself to slowly float back up between the Nautilus and the rocks to then surface and swim back to where Yrsa was lying down and holding out one long brown arm.

He took her hand, and she hauled him up with ease.

“Sharks,” Anne said.

“I saw.” He nodded. “They were attracted by the injured stingray.”

“I got it,” Yrsa said proudly.

Troy chuckled softly. “Yeah, you sure did.”

“Did you finish?” Elle asked.

“I think so; enough to do a test. But we really should scrape the entire hull down to give us a little more streamlining.” He looked back at the water that now churned as the feeding frenzy was reaching its peak as the huge stingray was torn to shreds.

“Let’s hope it works.” Elle looked toward the water. “If not, it’s going to be a while before anyone can go back in there.” She faced him. “What now?”

“Now? Now, I catch my breath, warm up, and have something to eat,” he replied.

In just minutes more, Yrsa had stoked the fire up which she had been using to smoke and dry some of the meat from the animal they had recently caught. Troy stepped across the rocks to it with the smell

of the meat making his stomach rumble.

Yrsa came and used a rough piece of cloth or hide to dry his back and shoulders, smiling and humming a tune as she did.

“Oh brother.” Anne rolled her eyes.

Troy turned to the Viking woman. “What song is that?”

Yrsa kept rubbing him down. “My mother used to sing it to me when I was a youngling. It was an old story about a huntress who meets and falls in love with a great warrior.” Her eyes lifted. “From a faraway land.” She blushed and her eyes dropped again. “I think it is a very old song.”

“It’s beautiful,” Troy replied. “What happened to your mother?”

Yrsa stopped wiping him down and sighed deeply. “Morag, my mother, went out with a band of hunters...” She briefly held up a hand with her five fingers spread, “...and when they reached the lowlands, they ran into a pack of *Stor-tann*. Only Hardak returned.” Her mouth turned down. “He said she fought bravely.”

“I’m sorry,” he said softly.

Yrsa nodded. “She died fighting as a warrior should. And she is in Odin’s Hall now.”

“Of course she is.” He saw her expression had fallen and he reached up to place a hand on her shoulder. “She would be proud of you.”

She finally looked up with a crooked smile. “She would have liked you. But maybe thought you were a little short.”

He grinned and held his arms wide. “But I’m all heart, right?”

The group then sat around the fire and shared some of the smoked meat. Dinosaur flesh had an odd flavor a little like alligator and felt in the mouth like a cross between fish and chicken. But after it was smoked and had salt from the seawater rubbed into it and dried again, it was more like chewy bacon.

They ate in silence and when done, Troy looked back at the Nautilus. “And now, let’s see if all my work paid off.” He got to his feet.

Back in the control center Troy carefully lifted Nemo’s body and carried it to the side of the room. Anne had to retrieve the skull and hat when they fell off, and then easing him down, and restoring the head, Troy looked into the empty eye sockets.

“Wish I could have met you, Captain. Mind if we take your Nautilus for a quick spin?” He half smiled as he gave a small salute. “Thank you.”

He stood and sat himself down at the console desk and began testing out more of the dials, levers, and buttons. He had retracted the iron shields over the view screen again, and they faced the opening to the grotto. He was delighted to see Anne and Elle had cleaned a lot of

the green slime from the windows and significantly improved visibility.

It was late afternoon now and he knew he didn't have that much light left, so this test he just wanted to see how much control they had at their command.

He had Anne placed halfway down the corridor and Elle in the ruby engine room. They would be relaying information back and forth to each other. Much to Yrsa's disappointment, they closed the hatch. Troy worried that if they moved after so many years of the Nautilus being in one place it might have lost its ballast ratio and they may simply tip over. And if the hatch was open it would fill with water, they'd sink, and never be able to refloat it.

He looked again at the heavily decorated console – it was a work of art incorporating a mid-1800s style that looked both Victorian, gothic, and high tech at the same time.

"I wish you'd left me a manual." He looked over his shoulder at Nemo. "But I'm betting most of everything was in your head."

He looked back along the console, ticking off what he could understand. "Rudder control. Ballast tanks. Hydroplanes." He grabbed the lever that had a small dial next to it.

"Here goes." He pushed the hydroplane lever forward, and there came a grinding noise and the needle on the dial went up a few degrees. Pulling the lever back the needle went down, he assumed indicating the degree of dive or lift.

"Good," he said.

He tried the same with the rudder and that worked, not smoothly, but it worked. The port side gave him good movement but would only give him a few degrees to the starboard. It might have to do, he thought.

There was another dial titled *oxygène* – oxygen. It was at 50% level, but he doubted the air would be breathable by now. His plan was not to risk diving in a one-hundred-and-fifty-year-old submarine because if they got into trouble, no one was coming to get them.

He stopped to think about it. If they really needed to seal the hatch then they probably should expel the old, compressed air and then refill the tanks. Still lots to do, he thought.

He finally placed a hand on the engine controls. *Okay*, he thought, and half turned. "Stand by," he yelled over his shoulder.

"Stand by," he heard Anne yell. And then a fainter, "Ready," from Elle, followed by Anne passing on Elle's reply.

He inhaled, then exhaled with a whoosh, and started the engines. The lights came on, and he waited, but there was no smell of smoke or urgent yells from behind him.

There was a large t-shaped lever with what looked like a piece of

carved quartz in each end. At the top was a single word: *vers l'avant* – forward. And at the bottom was the word *inverse* – reverse.

He placed his hand on it, and gently moved it forward a fraction. The metal fish shuddered, and he felt the vibrations run through the entire metal structure.

Troy placed his hands on the ship's wheel and gently turned it away from the rocks.

"All okay?" he yelled.

He heard the question relayed, and a positive reply.

But they hadn't moved. He reached down to move the lever a little more.

The vibrations increased, then there was the sound of cracking, and shuddering as if the Nautilus was a giant creature waking from a slumber and giving itself an almighty shake.

There came an almighty *thump*, as if something broke away, and then they began to move forward.

His grin split his face. "You. Beautiful. Big metal fish." He turned. "*We're moving!*" he yelled.

Troy steered the Nautilus out to the center of the grotto. Then stopped it.

"That's enough for now," he said and looked out at the grotto's size – there wasn't enough room to do a full circuit, so he would need to reverse. "Good time to test that too," he said, and slowly drew the lever back. The engines reversed rotation, and the steel vessel eased backwards.

Going in reverse he could only judge where he was, and sure enough there came a grinding of steel against rock as he grazed the ledge.

"*Oops.*" He shut it down, and the lights on the console vanished and he was left with a ticking sound like that of cooling steel.

"All okay back there?" he yelled.

The questions were relayed by Anne, and he got an affirmative response.

"I've shut down. Come back up," he replied.

In moments more he was joined by Anne and then Elle.

"I'd say that was a successful test." He grinned and held his arms wide. "In and out, and no warning lights. What happened back in the engine room?"

"Nothing," Elle said. "I was expecting there to be more glow, or less glow, or something. But there wasn't. I'm not sure if whatever force is emanating from the rubies..."

"Eggs," Anne inserted.

"If you say so." Elle turned back to Troy. "Well, however Nemo managed to harness them it seems to be a continual feed." She smiled.

“Cool, limitless power. Maybe these stones are worth even more than we think.”

“Yeah, well, I’ll just settle for them getting us home.” Troy took one last look around. “Too late to do anything else now, but over the next few days, we can take it for a longer sea run, stock up on supplies, and then maybe we can say goodbye to Lemuria, and leave the mysterious island to itself.”

“And, *ah*, just when are you planning on telling Gigantor?” Anne raised her brows and smiled sweetly.

“Soon,” he said, knowing it had to be done, but for some reason it gave him a small pain in the chest. He had told Yrsa he was leaving, but not when. Perhaps it would only become a reality at that point. For both of them.

“Should we gather more of the rubies? Just in case we need spare fuel,” Elle asked.

“They’re eggs, and we should leave them where they are,” Anne shot back.

“And the ones on the Nautilus?” Elle lifted her chin. “You know, the ones we need to use to get home?”

“We use them, but then destroy them when we get back,” Anne scowled.

“No, we won’t,” Elle said, lowering her brow.

“They’re dangerous.” Anne folded her arms.

“So you say.” Elle looked at Troy. “Frankly I still don’t believe it.”

“We have no idea about these drekka things. We don’t even know if they’re really reptiles, or dinosaurs, or something else entirely,” Anne’s voice rose.

Troy grunted. “We don’t even know if they’re terrestrial.”

“Exactly.” Anne turned back to Elle. “And what if they’re asexual, and don’t need a mate to reproduce?” She made a disgusted noise in her throat. “We could end up with a plague of them in the world. Again. It’d be the end of us, and everything; the next mass extinction.”

Elle groaned. “You’re going with the dragons wiped out the dinosaur’s theory again, are you?”

“That’s enough, you two. For now, we just focus on getting home. Okay?” He looked from one to the other.

Both gave near imperceptible nods.

Troy sighed. This trip is going to be hell, he thought.

“*Troyson? Are you coming out soon?*” Yrsa’s voice floated down from the hatch.

Elle folded her arms and smiled.

Anne grinned. “Aw, she misses you.”

Elle laughed. “Makes a nice change from Anne being jealous about Yrsa and not me.”

Anne gave Elle a sour grin. "Believe me, I was never jealous of you."
Troy sighed and turned away. "We're coming up so jus..." he began to yell but never finished.

"I fitted." Yrsa crouched as she pushed into the command room.

"I see." Troy grinned.

He also saw the scrapes on her sides and shoulders where she had forced her way in, obviously fed up with being left out.

"I heard you all shouting," she said.

"We're okay," Troy replied. "Thank you for worrying about us."

"It smells in here," she said, wrinkling her nose.

"It's been sealed up a long time, so the air is still stale. It'll clear soon." He waved her in closer. "Seeing as this is your first time in the Nautilus, I'll take you on a quick tour," he said. "Everyone else can wait topside."

EPISODE 18

If we leave our fears unchecked, they can grow, and soon become monsters

CHAPTER 06

Ipswich, borough in Suffolk, England

Alistair Drury hummed as he drove home from the tunnel digging site. The rain was pelting down, and the roads were little more than shallow, muddy streams as he headed onto his large country property on the outskirts of Ipswich city.

In spring and summer, it was usually a green forested wonderland, with meadows of wild flowers, weeping willows, and a few large oaks near the house. But today, it was nothing but a grey-on-grey mud lake, and as it was Monday, would have made his mood sink at the thought of it being just the start of another mind numbingly boring week of excavation and bone jarring grinding from the diggers.

But not today, and he hummed along to the radio and his mind danced over the coming riches he and the boys would accrue when he found a buyer for the massive ruby he had pulled out of the exposed cave.

He had already done some quick checking in potential value per karat for a perfectly clear stone of that size and saw the market suggested anything from 30 million to 50 million pounds. Split three ways, it would still be enough to set himself up for life.

As he pulled into his long curving driveway, Drury looked forward to seeing the ruby again, just to gaze at it and all the potential it held. He currently had it on a stand with a nice light shining down on it, making it glow and fill the room with a warm red ambiance.

He had left Rex in charge, his one-hundred-and-twenty-pound rottweiler, who would have dissuaded anyone from even thinking of breaking in.

Drury licked his lips thinking of how he'd grab a beer, pull up a chair and stare into its beautiful blood-red depths, and just daydream about a wonderful future. No more dirty, noisy tunnelling jobs, no more government pressure over time and budgets, just sunshine, margaritas, and trophy women young enough to be his daughter.

He laughed out loud from pure joy as he pulled up. He was at his front door in seconds more, unlocked it and elbowed it open.

"Rexy, I'm home, boy."

The big lug wasn't waiting for him in his usual place just behind the door after hearing him pull up. And there was no skittering of feet on polished wooden floorboards or the whine of impatience as he charged to meet him after being woken from a deep sleep.

"Where are you, Rexy? Rex, come on boy." He tossed his newspaper on the table, dropped his bag, and shucked off his wet parka and hung

it on the hook.

Odd, he thought. And then; maybe there had been an intruder.

His head snapped around. *The stone.*

He rushed into the study, and sure enough it was gone. Or most of it was gone. Instead of the brilliant red orb, there was just shards of a broken substance that looked like old granite. And there was something else – a puddle of thick slimy liquid surrounding the pieces.

He put a finger in it. “What the fuck is this shit?”

Leaning up against the study wall was his set of golf clubs and he yanked out his lucky putter and began his search of the house. This time not calling his dog, deciding silence was the best approach now.

One damned thing was for sure, he’d find out what happened to his treasure. And then Rex, right after.

Drury crept down the corridor and saw the slime trail on the ground. He paused and saw that after about a dozen feet it turned to head into the kitchen. He eased forward and stopped at the corner doorframe. He lifted his club, counted down from three, and then went in fast, flicking on the light.

The dark room shot to brilliance, and he firstly recoiled at the unidentifiable mess on the tiled floor.

There was an acrid stink in the air like acid and he couldn’t tear his eyes away from the lump sitting in the center of a puddle of mush. In amongst it was some sticks of bones and floating black fur. There were weird track marks through the mess as though something skated through it, again and again. And then there were other tracks leading from it out of the kitchen.

He looked back at the pile of mush and craned forward, holding his breath from the stinging gases lifting from it. He used the club to rake at it, and exposed some of the larger pieces, one of which was a dark furred tail, and another was the small knob of a black nose.

“Oh God... is that you, Remy?” Drury recoiled, feeling his gorge rise, and put a forearm over his nose and mouth as he backed out of the room.

“Bastards!” he screamed with his eyes streaming and a forearm still over his mouth. *“I’ll fucking kill you.”*

Back out in the hallway, he sucked in deep breaths to calm himself. He could only guess that someone broke in, stole his ruby, and sprayed the dog with some sort of highly corrosive acid. Only Barring and Thornet knew he had it, but he doubted either of them would have the brains or bollocks to do this sort of shit.

He hefted the golf club. *I’ll fucking smash ‘em all*, he thought.

He went back into the kitchen, stepped over the mess that was once his dog, and followed the trails out of the kitchen that led on toward his television room.

He came through the doorway and stopped dead when he spotted the thing in the middle of the room. It was roughly the size of a cat but covered in bristles or spines. And the creepiest thing about it was the two yellow slitted eyes, that were both fixed on him.

“What the *fuck* are you?” Drury said. “Did you do that to my dog?” He lifted the club.

The thing never moved but seemed to shiver slightly.

“Yeah, I’d be nervous too, you little bastard.” He raised the club above his head and leaned forward.

The thing shivered again, but too late he learned it wasn’t shivering from nerves, but instead it was building up some sort of pressure inside itself. Because it spat something that was yellow and sticky and splashed right across his nose and eyes.

“*Argh.*” Drury dropped the club, his hands going to his face to wipe away the mess that had immediately begun to burn like boiling water.

Drury opened his eyes, and in the last two seconds of him still having vision, just before the eyeballs themselves melted, he saw the bristled slug things, two of them, inching their way towards him.

He couldn’t even pick up the club or punch out at it, as where he used his fingers to wipe the mess away now burned like fire as the mess also stuck to them.

Suddenly he knew what happened to his Rex, and insanely wondered what bits of him would remain to be found.

“*Help,*” he whimpered, as he felt something crawling up his leg.

Mercifully, he blacked out.

Two days later when the young drekkas had finished consuming the human body, they went into a form of hibernation for another day, and during that time their skins had split and been cast off.

When they woke, they were both the size of a large dog. They made a hole in the door and then headed out into the English countryside.

CHAPTER 07

Nemo's Cove, Lemuria, deep beneath Greenland

The group sat around the small fire, finishing off some of the dried meat Yrsa had prepared.

Troy wiped his hands on his tattered shorts. "We'll need to do a longer test run," he said. "Take it out into the sea before we try and tackle the cold waters and the thousand miles back to Norway."

"And how will we find Norway without a compass?" Elle asked.

Troy stared into the small fire – she raised an excellent question – there was no compass or navigation equipment he had found.

"There are other ways," Anne replied. "Once we leave Odin's Gate and the ice rift, we should be out from the fog bank in a few hours. We can then navigate by the stars."

Troy grinned. "Good suggestion, but I'm not a sailor and have no idea how to do that."

"Me either, but the Vikings did it, and I'm sure we can work it out." She shrugged. "How hard can star navigation be?" She nodded at Yrsa. "Plus, we have our own Viking."

They turned to Yrsa who just looked confused. "What's a star?"

Elle scoffed softly. "Of course, in here, she's never even seen the sky, let alone the night sky."

Yrsa's frown deepened, and Troy reached out to grab her upper arm. "It doesn't matter. They're just things in our world." He dropped his hand. "It might take us a while, but we'll get there, eventually. Even if we have to just note that the sun rises in the east, and head approximately in an east-southeast direction."

"I guess so." Elle shrugged. "Normally the biggest fears would be running out of fuel, or food and water. But with our unfailing energy source, we should never run dry. And we'll just need to pack enough food and water for a trip that should only take us a few days."

Troy looked about. "And that means we need to take our cleaning, searching, and checking preparations down to the next level."

"We need to start stocking up now," Elle added. "We have a few months of warming to get going. If not it'll ice up again and we'll lose our chance for another year."

"Yep, we'll do it. Today, we clean and investigate. Tomorrow morning we'll do a longer test run, including speed check, and navigation. If that all works out, then we stock up, and then... we go home." He turned, smiling. "How does that sound?"

"Sounds like I feel better than I have in months. Years." Anne whooped loudly, creating an echo in the cavern.

“Okay, let’s get to it. We’ll do one-hour bursts and then report in with each other. Elle gets the engine room and any other storage areas back there. Anne, you get the individual cabins. I’ll do the control room.” He got to his feet. “And keep a lookout for all the other areas where something of use may be hidden. I’m betting Nemo was a huge fan of secret doors and compartments.”

“Good plan.” Anne stood.

Troy clapped his hands. “Let’s go.”

Elle walked straight over to the rock’s edge and jumped down onto the Nautilus deck. Anne followed her. Only Yrsa stayed sitting, staring trance-like into the fire.

He saw she had something in her hand, and he crossed to her. “You okay?” Troy asked.

She looked up at him. “You are very happy you are going home.”

“Yes, of course,” he replied.

Her broad shoulders hiked almost imperceptibly. “Then I do not think I am needed anymore.” Her lips just lifted on one side with a half-smile. “Do you think that, Troyson?”

Troy sat down next to the Viking woman. “You have been our savior more times than I can count. We would have been lost without you.”

“That was then,” she replied. “What about now? And in the future? I just feel...” Her mouth turned down. “It would be easier for you if I was gone.”

“That’s not true,” Troy protested as he sat across from her. “But we will need to go back to our own world soon.” He looked across at her. “You know we can’t stay here.”

“You could. With me.” Her eyes slid to him. “Let the women take the *jern fisk* back to your world. You don’t need them, or they you. You belong here, they don’t.”

This was getting complex, he thought. He nodded to her hand. “Hey, what have you got there?”

She opened her hand. “I didn’t steal it.” It was his wristwatch. “I saw it in your bag and wanted to look at it.” She held it out. “It’s a pretty thing.”

“It tells the time. Or used to,” he said. “It’s run out of energy now. But when it worked it told me what time of the day or night it was.”

“Why? Why do you need to know that?” She frowned. “There is always another day, and always more time.”

“Where I come from we’re always busy.” He laughed softly. “And we seem to want to always be somewhere else, on time.”

She held it out to him, but he shook his head. “You keep it.”

“I love it.” She continued to look at it. “Time,” she said and ran a finger over the glass. She looked up. “Time doesn’t matter here.”

“It does,” he scoffed softly. “But not for you.”

“No, not for me.” She closed her hand over it.

“Will you return to your village? After we’ve gone.”

Yrsa ignored the question, broke some small twigs, and tossed them into the fire. “You do not even ask if I want to come with you.” She stared into the flames.

“You would not like our world,” he replied softly.

“I gave you my *jomfruda*.” She lifted her eyes to his again. “I would like to be anywhere you are.”

The word was a little like the old Norse word for first time. Or maybe, virginity.

She reached out to lay her hand gently on his forearm. “Are you happy you met me, Troyson Strom?”

“Of course I am. More than you know.” He lay his hand over hers. He wanted to say more, and he could tell by the expectant look she gave him, she *wanted* him to say more. But instead, Troy took his hands from hers and her expression sagged.

She continued to stare at him, and he could feel her searing gaze deep inside his soul.

“I think I only have a little bit of your love.” She held up her hand, her thumb and forefinger a fraction apart and then dropped it. “If you were me, would that be enough for you?”

“I don’t know, Yrsa,” he replied softly.

“It would not.” She took in and then let out a long breath. “I know it would not.”

They sat in silence for a few more minutes, and he watched her as she went back to staring into the fire. He could see the tiny flames reflected in her eyes.

After another moment Troy held his arms wide. “Who knows what tomorrow will bring. Maybe good things.” He got to his feet.

“Yes, who knows.” Her smile this time was enigmatic and perhaps a little sorrowful.

“You’ll be okay here for a while?” he asked.

She nodded and turned back to the fire.

Troy crossed to the Nautilus, and just before he dropped into the vessel he looked back. Yrsa was looking back at him and her eyes glistened. He gave her a small wave and then dropped in through the hatch and headed straight to the control room where he stood at its center and turned slowly surveying the cabinets, small doors in the wall, and other potential hiding places.

“Let’s see here.” He bent to the first cabinet, which was, or had been, a magnificent carved mahogany, with ornate roses, and swirls perhaps depicting crashing waves – he looked back at the blooms – or maybe they were supposed to be sea anemone.

He squinted into the cabinet and saw there was a single box of maple or some other blond wood with ivory inlays. He flipped the small brass latch and lifted the lid.

He whistled; inside, nestled in red velvet, was a pair of what looked like sterling silver revolvers with magnificent engraving along the barrel and with bone or ivory handles. There were also six slugs nestled in their own compartments at the top.

There was a small brass plaque, and he read: “*To my friend Captain John Nemo, thank you, Abraham Lincoln.*”

“Holy Hell. Friends in high places.” Troy ran his fingertips over the cool steel, knowing the gun’s provenance, the condition, and the rarity, meant these revolvers were worth a fortune to a collector. He gently closed the box and looked around at the control room. “Am I kidding?” He knew that, in fact, *everything* in here, including the submarine, was worth a fortune to the right people. He pushed the box back in where he found it.

Next, Troy opened a long cabinet and inside found shelves of jars and boxes. He lifted a box, titled ‘*requin monster – Antarctique*’.

He translated: “monster shark – Antarctica.” He lifted one of the triangular eight-inch teeth, and half smiled. He’d seen some of these teeth before. “*Megalodon*,” he whispered.

But these hand-sized teeth looked different to the ones he had seen in the past. These were not the ancient, blackened fossils, but were a gleaming white. And Antarctica? That didn’t make sense at all.

“You’re a man of mystery, Nemo,” he said to the empty room.

Troy shut the box and replaced it. The next item was a jar, a foot tall and about six inches wide, that held yellowing fluid with something suspended within it. The fluid level was starting to recede even though the top was sealed with red wax. He slid it closer and examined its contents.

He grinned as he read the plaque. “Really?”

Une patte de loup-garou – mi-transformation – A werewolf’s paw – mid transformation, it read.

There was a hand-shaped object floating in the liquid. The thumb and first finger, the index finger, was from a man’s hand, and were pink, smooth, and obviously human. But then it all got weird, because the other three fingers were lengthened, thick and strong, and covered in coarse, bristled fur. The nails that grew out of the tip of the digits were dark talons and looked wickedly sharp. It looked like someone had sewn half a human hand to some horrifying wolf aberration.

He read the label on the jar: *Le Beast of Gévaudan*.

Troy raised his eyebrows and exhaled through pressed lips. “What a wild world you lived in back then, sir.”

He pushed the jar back, and quickly sorted through the other

shelves, pushing aside other boxes and papers all in French. He knew he'd have more time on their voyage to check everything out in detail.

Troy was about to shut the cabinet when one last thing on the bottom shelf caught his eye. It was a jar, another large one, and it contained a head, a human head. Or at least a human-shaped head. But the plaque stuck to the jar told him: '*Visage d'une sirène du Pacifique Sud*' – he knew some of the words, but others he just guessed at.

"I think: *Face of a South Pacific Mermaid*," he whispered.

He leaned closer and peered in through the milky liquid. The face had flattened features, and some of the blue-green color was still on the cheeks. There was no real nose, just a lump with two vertical slits in it. There were also gills just showing on the stump of the neck, and the slightly ajar mouth held rows of glassine, needle-like teeth a little like those of a moray eel.

The eyelids were half open giving the face a hooded disinterested gaze, and the eyes themselves were pure black with no separation of pupil, iris, or sclera, exactly like those of a great white shark.

"*Yech*," he said. "Not exactly your standard Disney mermaid." He pushed the jar back onto its shelf.

Troy examined most of the other cabinets and found a box of huge safety matches, still dry, and even came across a bottle of sealed cognac, which he thought would come in handy crossing the frozen sea on their way home.

He straightened and put his hands on his hips and turned slowly. Finally, he crossed back to the main console, and using a rag wiped down most of the bench top. There were controls for filling and emptying the ballast tanks which he'd test later. Plus, an onboard communication system which he pressed the switch for the engine room and heard Elle moving around back there.

"Hello, testing?"

"*Huh*... hey, is that you Troy?" Elle asked.

He could imagine her looking up at whatever box or vent produced his voice.

"Yeah, onboard comms. Still works." He grinned. "Plus I found us a bottle of cognac. Evening drinks at 5."

"I'll be there," she replied, and he could hear the smile in her voice.

He didn't quite know what to think about her just yet. He desperately wanted to trust her, but a small voice in his head whispered a warning and told him to be on guard. And if it wasn't his conscience warning him, then Anne was there constantly telling him to steer clear.

Troy half smiled. Anne had been his best friend and seen him through thick and thin and saved his life more than once on the

island. He owed her a lot and saw her more as a sister. Though he guessed he better not tell her that as he knew she wanted to be more than friends, but he wasn't sure he needed that complication right now.

Complication? He shook his head. Then what was he doing with Yrsa?

He had no answer.

The huge woman had an animal magnetism that he found intoxicating and irresistible. And oddly, where he should be insanely excited about leaving, she was the reason he felt a small hollowness in the pit of his stomach.

"Forget it; that would not end well," he whispered.

He shook his head to clear it of images of the tall, striking woman, and went on with his cleaning.

Elle moved around the engine room, or rather the power source room, checking cabinets, and small boxes built into the wall. She pulled some empty boxes aside and found a door, heavily fortified, with dime-sized rivets all around it.

She placed a hand on it, and her brows came together – it was warm to touch. She then tried the lever handle and found it stuck.

She was about to call Troy, but then stopped herself, and instead quickly searched for something she could use to open it. She remembered seeing some tools in one cabinet and there was an iron mallet-type hammer, and she drew it out, and held it over the door handle.

She paused, thinking it through – the sound would vibrate right through the iron ship. Did she want that? Not until she found out what was inside.

She took off her shirt and draped it over the handle. Bare breasted, she lifted the mallet and brought it down – the weight of the mallet was cushioned, but it was enough to force the lever down. She hit it again, and the door opened a fraction.

Elle put her hand to it and pushed. Then pushed harder. With a grinding sound the door was pushed inwards.

The odd metallic smell, then the heat, and the glow, made her stop and lift an arm over her face. It was a storeroom, and stacked like bottles of wine in cradles lined with the silver-streaked dirt were more of the rubies. A lot more.

It confused her for a moment, and then she saw the basket in the corner of the storeroom that contained shards of rubies that were a dull color, and were broken, cracked, and turning to dust.

She had a theory and quickly went back to the power chamber, lifting the lid. Sure enough now on closer inspection she saw that

three of the rubies were a vibrant red, but one of them was a little duller than the rest.

She shut the lid, her mind whirring. So, it seemed these ruby batteries could be drained. And Nemo knew that they could, so that was why he kept spares.

She smiled and went back to pull the iron door closed. She didn't subscribe to Anne's theory of them being eggs. There had been no proof and in fact there was more proof that they were a treasure worthy of the greatest kings and emperors that ever lived.

She pulled the boxes back in front of it, and also found a sheet of old canvas or perhaps a stiff animal hide that she piled in front of the door, concealing it.

Patience, she thought. She wiped her sweat-slicked face and under her arms with her shirt. Things were coming together, and hopefully everything she had worked for and dreamed of would be hers.

Troy continued his cleaning and came to a few extra buttons and controls on the console top. There was one larger than most, and it had the word '*Lance*' written under it.

"Well, I think '*Lance*' means *Lance*," he said and pushed it down. There was a sliding sound from out the front of the craft, and he looked up, then laughed and shook his head.

"Ouch." He straightened to get a better view. "That'd bring tears to your eyes."

From the nose of the Nautilus a steel spike had thrust out. It was about twelve feet in length and ended in a wicked point.

"At least that's something," he thought, and pressed the button again to retract it. He tried the other buttons, but couldn't discern any activity, so continued examining the flat surface on the console and pressed down with the cloth. He stopped, and then traced one section with his fingertips. It felt like there was a panel. Was it left intentionally blank? he wondered. Maybe a piece of technology that Nemo had planned but never got around to building in.

He pressed it and the spring-loaded top popped open. Inside there was an oil cloth covering a package and he reached in and lifted it out, and he already guessed it was a book.

He lay it on the counter top and flipped open the cloth.

Journal du Capitaine – The Captain's Journal. Troy smiled. "Nemo's voyage log."

He carefully opened the book and flipped through the man's handwriting which was a magnificent calligraphy and rapidly becoming a lost art as more and more communication and work was done via typing onto a screen.

It was in French, and though he desperately wanted to dive into it,

he knew he would struggle to read and understand it and it would be a time consuming and exhausting job for him to try and translate the entire book. And he knew he'd do a bad job at it. It would have to be done in smaller doses, and perhaps Anne could assist him.

He would have asked Elle to help, but he had a feeling that if there were any valuable secrets revealed, she might not share it with them.

He flipped a few pages and saw there were drawings – images done in pen of fantastical beasts, islands with volcanos, and even one image that looked like a crashed flying saucer, marked: *Tunguska, Siberia*.

He flipped a little further and saw a drawing of Lemuria, the Mysterious Island. Plus a full-page sketch of the Vikings like Yrsa. He stared at one of the women, with braided and decorated hair, exactly like Yrsa. Perhaps one of her ancestors, he wondered.

He placed his fingers on the drawing, tracing it for a moment, before sighing. "I may be infatuated," he said softly. "But I'm *not* in love," he warned himself.

"With who?"

"What?" Troy spun to see Anne standing there with raised eyebrows. Troy shut the book. "Ah, with my own cleverness for finding Nemo's journal." He held it up. "See here."

"Wow." Anne joined him and ran a hand over the leather cover. "Magnificent," she said, and then opened it to flick through the pages.

"His voyages, and observations. His actual words." She stopped at a hand drawing of a massive snake, with a human being drawn next to it perhaps for scale but firing a rifle at the massive reptile. The thing must have been sixty feet long and ten feet wide.

"*South America – on the table-top mountain in the clouds.*" She scoffed slightly. "Normally I would have said the man had a Guinness Book of Records worthy imagination." She gently closed the log book and handed it back to him. "But after spending so long on this island, and seeing what we have seen, I'm prepared to give anything and everything the benefit of the doubt."

Elle joined them. "Plenty of tools and also some of the old diving suits complete with brass helmets and lead boots. Not sure if they're still water tight," she said. "You guys find anything?"

Anne's brow came together as she stared at the woman. "You okay? Your face is very red."

"I've been working back there," Elle snapped back. "I'm hot, and probably irradiated."

"Good." Anne shrugged, then turned back to Troy. "The cabins have a few personal effects, and the bedding is rotten. However, the bunks themselves still look useable, and there is a storage room with spare blankets, so we'll be fine."

Troy held up the ship's journal. "Nemo's logbook. It'll make for

interesting reading on the way home.”

“Field test next?” Elle asked.

“Tomorrow, we take the Nautilus for a tour, maybe circle the island.” He smiled. “It will probably be its first voyage in one hundred and fifty years, so be prepared for a swim if need be.”

One after the other they climbed from the hatch. Troy was last out and wiped his hands on the remnants of his trousers.

“Where’s Yrsa?” Anne asked.

“What?” Troy looked about, not seeing her.

“Maybe she’s gone hunting,” Elle remarked.

“Without Troy?” Anne pointed. “And look, she took everything, even her bedding mat.”

Troy stared. Anne was right, everything she had brought with her was now gone.

“Yrsa!” he shouted. He ran across the rocks to their small fire and then leapt up onto a boulder. “Yrsa!”

Her name echoed in the grotto cave.

“Not much of a big goodbye person, is she?” Anne snorted.

“It’s for the best. And she knew that,” Elle said. “I guess she wanted to leave on her own terms, and not be told to go.”

“I would never have...” Troy groaned, jumped down from the rock and then sat down, feeling a cloud of gloom descend on him. Of course he was going to tell her to go.

It would be easier for you if I was gone, she had said. She was testing him, looking for him to give her something encouraging. And he gave her nothing.

Should he go after her? he wondered. But for what? He was still going home, and there was no way she could come with them. She would be an oddity, an outlier, and displaced by a thousand years of cultural differences.

Troy knew that even if he could catch up with her, he had nothing to offer her.

“You okay?” Elle asked.

“Yeah, yeah.” He got to his feet. “I’m... I’m just going for a walk to clear my head.” Without another word he grabbed up one of the small harpoons and set off to the grotto’s entrance and the path to the cliff top.

A small part of him hoped he’d see her beautiful face beaming at him when he got to the top. But he knew she was gone and gone for good.

As he trudged up the cliff path, for some reason even with Anne and Elle as company, he felt more alone now than he had in his entire life.

CHAPTER 08

Hommelstø village, Nordland County, Norway

It was a quiet little village located on the shore of an arm of the Velfjorden, one of the ancient glacial fjords in Nordland County, Norway.

Most of the well-kept houses were made of wood, painted mostly a brick-red, were under two stories, and the village had a population of around two-hundred-and-eighty people depending on the season. It was a place where everyone knew everyone.

In winter the days were only five hours long and the snow and ice could close Hommelstø in for weeks at a time. But now, with late spring sunshine, the air was clear, and the small fishing boats were back out.

As the sun was setting on another day of pale blue skies over green jagged hills and icy, azure water, something lumped the glass-smooth sea of the bay as it approached the shoreline.

Lights were on in most homes showing as golden squares, and through the glass there were inviting, warm interiors. Smoke rose lazily from chimneys and the smell of cooking emanated throughout the silent village.

The dragon pulled itself from the water, crushing the shoreline rocks to gravel. It had travelled down the coast from the national park, following the scent of the warm-blooded creatures.

The animal was big now at around twenty tons, and as its strength grew, so did its intelligence. And hunting skills.

Its steps were slow and careful as it had found that the small two-legged creatures frightened easily and fled. It was better to catch them in their dens when they slept.

The light was fading, and its yellow slitted eyes were near luminous in the darkness. It came to the first single story house and inhaled deeply. It smelled the occupants inside – several different scents, and some of them the young. Their dens were fragile, and it coiled huge muscles, and then lunged to crash through the wood and glass and had its head and shoulders inside in seconds.

In moments more it was feasting on the first of them.

Senior Detective Bjorn Lomberg stood at the edge of the rubble and surveyed the damage. He lifted his head, seeing a pathway of destruction running through at least twenty of the houses. All were obliterated.

He turned to his junior partner, Andrej Hansen. “How many?”

“Thirty-two confirmed dead, fifty areas of possible death, and over two hundred missing,” Hansen replied.

Lomberg looked down at the sheet covering the remains. “Survivors?”

“One. A six-year-old boy with level-2 autism. He’s sedated now, but we got to speak to him for half an hour before the medical guys shut us down,” Hansen replied. “But he didn’t make much sense.”

“The autism?” Lomberg raised his eyebrows.

Hansen bobbed his head from side to side. “Probably.” He turned to look up toward the hills. “We’re doing a search of the surrounding countryside in case some people fled and then just kept on going.”

Lomberg sighed. Thirty-two confirmed dead, fifty areas of possible death, and over two hundred missing – and he knew exactly what his partner meant by *areas of possible death* and had no desire to look again at the remains. There was little left of them – a few scraps of hair, some shoes with the feet still in them, but the ankles seeming to have been melted off rather than torn or severed from the body.

Some of the other houses were the same, but for the most part, the people had just vanished. Or been taken.

“Hundreds of people gone, or killed, and just one witness, a kid with autism. We need something, anything. What did he *really* say?” Lomberg turned.

Hansen opened his small pad and read for a moment, his lips pursed. “Obviously he was traumatized, and still frightened out of his head. His story was more like a horror movie, and with his condition we don’t know what was real and what came from his imagination.” He flipped pages in his pad. “He said a monster came out of the water, tore through the houses, ate the people, and then went back into the water.” He flipped another page. “We managed to get him together with our sketch artist.”

“Good. And?” Lomberg waited.

Hansen’s brow furrowed. “And I think we’re looking for a dinosaur.” He looked up, brows raised.

Lomberg exhaled loudly through his nose. He wished he had more eye witnesses. No, he wished he had zero deaths. Something about this gave him a shitty feeling in the stomach. Everything about it just felt bad.

Lomberg scratched his head. The story was a monster attacked the village, ate or melted the villagers, and then swam away and vanished. How could he take that to his superiors?

Hansen looked up at his senior partner. “Relatives want to come, but none want to stay unless we do something to protect them.”

“I don’t want them to come either,” Lomberg scoffed. “We’ll keep some armed officers here for a while.”

He then walked down to the water's edge. "A dinosaur, huh?" He pointed. "If it was it came ashore over there. And went back in here. And by the size of the drag marks, this thing is huge." He put his hands on his hips. "Is it aquatic? Or did it go ashore somewhere else?" He thought about it for a moment more. "Get the maritime police to conduct a shoreline search. If it left the water again, it should be easy to spot.

"And if it didn't?" Hansen asked.

Lomberg scratched his chin. "We'll get some divers to check out the fjord. Just a hunch, but my gut feel is it's not a sea beast." He turned. "I don't think we have just had a visit from our very own Loch Ness Monster."

He drew in a breath and narrowed his eyes and spoke while staring out over the now placid water. "Do you remember just over a year ago when that ship was washed ashore up in the national park?"

"Yeah, I remember." Hansen nodded. "The two melted bodies. And those weird tracks."

"The weird tracks that left the boat and headed up into the wilder parts of the national park. So here's an insane theory." He raised an eyebrow. "This is the same thing."

"But those tracks were tiny." Hansen pointed with his pen. "And these ones are as wide as a bulldozer."

Lomberg grunted his acknowledgement. "I know. But I can't help feeling that whatever left that boat, has now all grown up."

CHAPTER 09

The eastern cliffs, Lemuria, deep beneath Greenland

Troy sat on the cliff top and stared out over the water. He was torn between continuing to work on getting back home or setting out to look for Yrsa.

And if he found her? He had no idea what he could say to her. He couldn't promise her anything to entice her back with them. It was undoubtedly better for her to stay with her own people. It was, after all, what he had wanted and hinted to her. But now that it happened, he regretted it and wanted her back.

She would have no life with him. He tried to imagine her in a big modern city – a young woman nearly eight feet tall. The girl with the flashing blue eyes, hair twisted and twined with bones, colored stones, and flowers, green, swirling clan tattoos on her arms, and with crushed berries on her body to make herself smell nice.

For him.

He groaned again.

He heard a soft sound from behind him. His spirits immediately soared, and he turned with a huge smile breaking his face.

“Yrsa?”

But it wasn't her. Instead, not more than a few dozen feet back was a seven-foot-tall raptor-like creature with green and black tiger stripes on its back, and unblinking eyes in a face that seemed all mouth and teeth.

His melancholy had blinded him to the fact that the coast was where the predators came to see if anything tasty had washed up.

When the creature saw it had been spotted it sprinted the last few dozen feet while letting out an ear-piercing screech.

It crossed the space in a few seconds, accelerating to a blistering speed, but Troy had practiced for these types of charges from a creature larger and heavier than he was, and he planted the butt of the harpoon, and lifted its tip.

The raptor came too fast to dodge the sharp metal tip and caught it in the belly. Its momentum lifted the harpoon, and it went in an arc over Troy, and into space.

Troy watched it fall, taking the harpoon with it. There was a rock shelf down there, and a hundred feet down it impacted with the rocks to leave a wet red mark and bounced once to lay still.

Troy sucked in a deep breath, feeling his heart pummeling his ribs. No, he couldn't stay here. Sooner or later, he would get old, or slow, or distracted, and he'd end up being torn to pieces.

He turned away from the thick forest. Sorry Yrsa, but this savage life had to end for him. He needed to go home.

Troy headed back down the path to the grotto and the Nautilus. There was several hundred pounds of meat on the rocks that would feed them for days.

He half smiled; looks like it hadn't been a waste of time after all.

"You okay?" Anne asked as she sat next to him at the command console.

Troy stopped running his hands over the controls and nodded. "Yeah, I'm fine. Just concerned that we basically kicked her out. And after she's saved our lives too many times to count. A shitty way for us to say thanks."

"She'll be fine. This is her home," Anne replied, seeming a little pleased. "This is where her people are." She reached out to lay a hand on his forearm. "Your people are on the outside. Not in here." She leaned forward. "Right?"

He nodded. "Yeah, yeah," he agreed but still felt like crap.

Elle re-joined them. "Ready for the test run?"

"As we'll ever be," he replied. "Shut the hatch?" he asked.

"Shut and sealed," she replied.

"Power on," he said and powered up the energy feed throughout the Nautilus.

He then retracted the front shields and the silvery morning light slowly rolled across them. His left hand rested on the wheel, and his right hovered over the propulsion lever.

"Here goes nothing." He pushed it forward one level.

There was a hint of vibration and a hum running throughout the superstructure as the craft eased forward. Troy turned it slightly from the rocks.

"Nice and steady until we get out," he said more to himself.

He piloted the strange fish-like submarine out through the grotto entrance and as they passed through it the light shone down on the skin of the vessel, making it look a solid blue iron, with a few stripes of rust.

The water outside was its usual glass smooth, and he turned the wheel to port, the left side, and they glided down along the cliffs, soon coming to the beaches they had come ashore on just a few years ago.

With the shield-like panels retracted, the viewing glass wrapped around to about one-hundred-and-eighty degrees, giving them excellent forward and side vision. Their only real blind spots were behind them.

Troy practiced maneuvering the vessel as they continued down the coast for several minutes until they came to a plain that afforded a

greater view of further into the island. He pulled the lever back and the Nautilus glided to a stop.

“Our mysterious island, Lemuria,” he said softly.

“The hidden world,” Anne added.

In the distance they could see the mountain, the Mother of the Sky, the one that they had tried to scale within to escape. It still afforded a way out, but where it left them was a bleak wasteland of snow and ice. On foot, it offered them nothing but a cold death.

He thought he could make out where Odin’s Fortress was engulfed in the embrace of the colossal tree, and he let his eyes wander over the landscape looking for the back of the massive land leviathan that was the drekka.

There was also one other spot he focused on. The area in the highlands, close to the mountain where he knew the Viking village was. Right now, the thick forest looked serene, with a primordial mist curling through the mighty trees and their canopies. A few huge leathery winged creatures glided just over the treetops, and he bet if they went up on deck, they might hear the bass trumpeting sounds of creatures booming out with calls of mating, territorial warning, or death and distress.

He knew it was a prehistoric world, and both a wonder and a terrifying place. He had wondered whether he might miss it. Now he knew he would.

He drew in a deep breath. “Let’s continue on a little further.” He pushed the lever forward a single notch.

“That’s all?” Elle asked.

“*Huh?*” He turned.

“Come on, let’s see what it can do.” She smiled and nodded to the console. “This baby has six speed notches for a reason.”

Anne scoffed. “And hasn’t been run in over a century and a half. That’s a mad suggestion.”

Elle turned, keeping her smile. “What is madness is if we really do need to push it in an emergency, only finding out then it would fail.”

“Yeah, she’s right,” Troy said. “An extra notch or two shouldn’t make any difference.”

He pushed it forward one more degree. The hum through the Nautilus increased, and so did the vibration.

He looked over the few controls and dials. “I have no way of knowing if we spring a leak, or if the watertight seals are holding.”

“If the water starts lapping at our ankles, then we’ll know,” Anne replied.

They continued around a headland, and Troy pushed it up another notch, while also testing again the maneuverability at that speed. He swung the craft from port to starboard, testing how reactive it was.

The craft moved well, and though it was a sluggish overweight antique, over a century and a half ago, this thing would have seemed magical to someone sailing in a wooden clipper.

He was getting comfortable with the controls and more confident they had found their way home, and as they came around a huge rocky headland, there was a long beach.

"Hey." He slowed. "Well, will you look at that."

They could see that the jungle had been cleared well up from the beach and there was a fortification wall against the green that must have been fifty feet high. Inside there was a village of dwellings – not huts, but the Viking wooden houses he remembered.

"Vikings," Elle said and leaned forward. "Maybe a different clan."

The men and women were coming from their houses, and he saw that many of them came down to the water line. Each of them had a spear or spears, and he guessed they were getting ready to defend their village from the strange sea beast gliding past them.

The Nautilus was only a few hundred yards from the shoreline. Troy stopped them and gently turned the nose in toward the land.

A few huge spears sailed out, nearly making the distance. Troy eased them back another hundred feet as he worried that the weight of the iron-tipped spear, combined with all that mass and velocity, might just be able to punch right through their view screen.

"Guess that answers the question about whether we should go in and say hello," Elle said.

"You'd end up back in the dinosaur ring," Anne laughed.

"Hey, I would have loved to have seen that," Elle replied.

Troy turned to Anne. "Yeah, and if I lost, they were going to eat you."

"Still worth it." Elle grinned.

"Yeah, go to hell," Anne shot back.

Troy reached for the old brass ship's telescope he'd found and stood. "I'm going topside to have a closer look."

"Yeah, and I know what for," Anne said, following him.

Elle trailed behind them.

He popped the hatch and climbed up onto the Nautilus' metal skin. The others followed him and he extended the long spyglass. The lenses were a little cloudy, but it was still a precision instrument, and gave him better vision of the village and its inhabitants.

He saw they could have been Yrsa's tribe as they were so similar – all enormously tall and powerful. There were many women, but none had taken to wearing the black stripe of warpaint across the eyes and bridge of their nose.

"See anyone you recognize?" Elle asked.

"Not many friendly faces amongst them." He grinned and handed

over the glass. "In fact, they *all* look pissed off."

Elle looked along the shoreline. "Notice something?" she asked. "No boats."

Troy looked again and began to nod. "You're right. For a once seafaring race, why haven't they even attempted to sail out? Or even fish."

Anne took the spyglass. "They do fish. I can see nets drying." She continued to move the glass along the shoreline, one eye scrunched up. "Maybe something in the water stops them from coming out here."

"Yeah, I can understand that," Troy replied.

Suddenly all the tribe turned at the sound of a long mournful horn.

"What's that? Is that an animal call?" Anne craned forward. "Something's happening."

The horn blared deep and low, and in seconds, the entire village had emptied.

Anne handed him the spyglass. "I don't know what just happened. Was it us that scared them off?"

"I doubt it," he said.

"When the horn sounded, they didn't face us..." Elle folded her arms, "...they all faced the jungle."

"The horn. That was a warning signal." Troy lowered the spyglass.

"Warning about what?" Anne asked.

"Holy shit." Troy backed up a step. "About that."

Huge trees were pushed aside, and the defensive wall that had been built at the forest's edge was no match for the massive beast as its head and snout went right over the top, turning the thick, sharpened poles to splinters.

"The dragon," Anne breathed.

Troy was spellbound watching the thing from a distance. It was even bigger than he remembered, standing as tall as a ten-story building and being as wide as a city block. Its scaled hide was so large, he saw grasses, and even trees growing upon it, and some smaller flying animals taking off and landing on the moving mountain.

Its huge yellow slitted eyes looked over the dwellings, and a single clawed foot crushed several houses as if they were matchboxes.

It raked its foot back and sniffed deeply as if seeking the morsels of flesh inside. It then lifted its head and the roar that followed was like a physical force that rolled out over the water. And everything else in the mysterious island answered – with silence. Every living thing had gone to ground – the people, the animals, big and small, all of them knew that when the drekka hunted, it was best to be a long way away.

Troy stood in awe, wishing he had a camera; however, he knew that the images of the horrifying beast would be burned deeply into his brain forever. The monster was a curse on the island, and he was just

glad it had ceased to exist out in the real world.

Then the massive, spiked head lifted and the yellow eyes as large as a train tunnel and slitted like those of a goat, fixed on the Nautilus.

“Oh shit, it’s looking right at us,” Anne said.

“Obviously,” Elle scoffed. “Because we’re now the biggest prey left who didn’t flee.”

“Yeah, ah, I think you’re right; maybe we shouldn’t hang around anymore.” Troy already knew the thing could swim, and just as they started to head for the hatch, the dragon headed to the water line.

“Here it comes,” Elle said, and quickly jumped down into the Nautilus.

Anne followed, and then Troy. He raced to the control seat, pushed the lever forward to three notches and swung the wheel.

As they came around they saw the huge monster entering the water, with its eyes still fixed on the submarine. As the view of the dragon passed from the control panel window, Elle raced back to look from one of the rear portholes. She yelled updates from back along the steel corridor.

“It’s still following us,” she yelled.

“Time to go home.” Troy knew if they could make it back, the grotto mouth was too small to admit the dragon’s bulk.

Was it big enough to dig them out? he wondered.

He hoped not.

At the moment, on the third propulsion notch Troy estimated they were doing about five-knots, like a fast walk or at jogging pace. He was concerned about pushing the old vessel after being idle for so long. But he knew if the dragon caught them, it would destroy the ship and them in it. They had to stay ahead of it.

“Troy...” Elle yelled, and he didn’t like the tone in her voice. “It’s gaining on us.”

Shit, he thought. No choice. He pushed the lever up another two notches to five, lifting the speed to around eight knots. It could go to six notches, maybe 10-knots, but already he felt the vibrations right through the ship’s infrastructure.

The heavy metal craft beautifully sliced through the water, a testament to Nemo’s engineering skill and understanding of liquid flow dynamics. However, the ancient submarine was heavily fortified and therefore sluggish on the surface.

“Still coming... and it’s speeding up. It’s definitely after us,” Elle yelled, her voice higher this time.

“While we’re on the surface, it can see us,” Anne remarked. “Should we dive?”

“I’m not sure the Nautilus will take it,” Troy replied.

Anne looked back over her shoulder to the dark corridor leading to

the rear of the vessel. "Then you better give it all it's got." She laughed softly. "Or we die never knowing."

"Okay, Nemo, here's your big chance. Don't fail us now." Troy pushed it up to the sixth notch, and the craft began to cut the water at around 10 knots. But it shuddered now, and he could feel it right to his bones.

"Watch out!" Anne yelled.

A huge fish-like creature was bumped out of their way by the nose of the Nautilus. It looked like a porpoise with a long skinny snout, but it was around fifty feet long.

"That was an Ichthyosaur." Anne's mouth hung open in delight. She rose from her chair and leaned closer to the canopy window. "Marine reptiles." She pointed. "Look, a school of them and they're moving in a pod."

"Yeah, great, love to stop and say hello, but we're a little busy right now," Troy replied.

"Still coming, and fast," Elle's strained voice floated back to them.

"That's all we've got," Troy yelled back and half-turned. "Hey, do you think maybe the dragon will be attracted by the large lizard-fish things?"

Anne shook her head. "Maybe, but they're too fast for it, I think. Also, they're diving." She frowned. "So many of them."

Troy cursed under his breath. He hoped that moving in amongst the massive fish-like reptiles would make the vessel less visible, but as the Nautilus was moving in a straight line on the surface they were the easy target, as the rough-scaled sea reptiles were veering all over the place, and sometimes right across their bow.

"Still there, keeping pace," Elle shouted. "But at least not gaining on us."

"Water's probably getting deeper," Anne observed. "Probably means that the dragon is either going to have to start swimming or give up."

"We just need to make it back to the grotto. The lip of the cave is too low for it to enter." He kept his hand on the propulsion lever.

Just then the lights flickered, and the craft began to slow. "Hey, what just happened?" Troy grabbed the propulsion lever and drew it back to level three, which he judged their speed was. He pushed it forward again, but it did nothing.

"Why have we slowed?" Anne asked.

Troy shook his head. He had nothing and turned to her. "Get back there and check the engine room. We're losing power for some reason."

Anne raced back along the steel corridor, her feet clattering on the metal floor. She came to Elle and joined her, and briefly glanced

through the porthole. The huge dragon was only a few hundred yards back, swimming now, but its yellow slitted eyes were still on them, and worse, it was gaining on them again.

"We're losing power," she said. "Let's go."

She and Elle headed to the rear power room, and she went straight in to the round containment bed and lifted its lid.

Immediately the warm red glow filled the small room. But it wasn't as bright as she remembered. And then she saw why.

"Oh no, look."

Of the four red stones in the round repository, one of them was a dull grey. The others still shone brightly, but the one that was like a battery without a charge, looked burned out, and had a crack running through it.

Elle reached toward it.

"Don't touch that," Anne exclaimed.

Elle turned. "Why, it's dead?"

"It might have hatched," she replied. "We shouldn't be handling them."

"Bullshit. We already have." Elle reached in and grabbed it. She lifted it free and held it up. "It's drained."

She then threw it down on the floor and it split open along the crack. Both women stared down at it. Nothing emerged, and there was nothing inside.

"Like I thought. It's just a stone," Elle said. "And solid right through."

"No. It just means it never began to incubate," Anne insisted. "Somehow it got drained, and, ah, it expired."

"Expired, huh? Whatever you say." Elle smirked as she turned away. "Anyway, we've got bigger issues right now." Elle went to the communication box on the wall. "Troy, can you hear me?"

"I'm here, anything to report?" he asked.

"We checked inside the energy unit. It seems one of the stones has been drained. That's got to be why we are losing power; we're now one gem short."

"Egg," Anne said softly, but Elle turned her back on her.

Anne shook her head. "I can't believe Nemo didn't foresee this. He should have had spares."

"Well, he didn't." Elle turned back. "Or maybe he has a storeroom back in the grotto cave."

Anne nodded, but her brow was still furrowed.

"Come back up. And someone check on the damned dragon. I need to know where it is," Troy replied.

"Go, let's go." Elle nearly pushed Anne out of the room.

The women raced back to the front, with Elle pausing at one of the

porthole windows.

“Oh my God.” She stood back. “It’s nearly on us.”

Anne kept going and Elle raced after her. Elle knew they had minutes to escape, or they’d be run down. On the way, she stopped under the hatch, ran up the ladder and dragged it closed. Then sprinted back to the front of the Nautilus.

Troy turned. “And?”

“It’s on us,” Anne said. “If you’ve got anything up your sleeve, now is the time to pull it out.”

Troy groaned and turned back to the front screen. They were still moving amongst the school of huge Ichthyosaur, that got so dense that from time to time needed to be bumped aside, slowing them even more.

A plan formed in his mind. “I’m betting dragons can’t count.” He turned back to the front. “Time for a little bait and switch.”

He turned to Elle. “Did I hear you close the hatch?”

She nodded. “We have minutes, or maybe seconds.”

“Good, then here goes.” He stared straight ahead, his hands on the controls. “Timing is everything.”

The next time one of the Ichthyosaur was a little slow getting out of the way, and Troy ran into it, he jammed his hand down on the only weapon they had – the twelve-foot-long spike – it shot from the nose of the Nautilus and speared the huge marine reptile.

“Got him.” The fish-like creature shuddered, making the entire craft shake, and at least five feet of the ancient spike broke off. But the reptile was mortally wounded and immediately began to turn on its side on the surface.

“Diving!” he yelled and immediately pushed the craft into a steep and rapid dive.

The Nautilus went under the marine reptile, just as the dragon was upon them.

Elle ran back down the corridor to the porthole and watched as to the massive dragon it must have seemed that one second the Nautilus was there, and then next in its place on the surface, was a floundering fifty-foot-long creature.

Just as the ship had gone beneath the surface, the clear water still allowed Elle to see what happened next.

The dragon’s head came down, and then lifted. Held in its mouth, like a grizzly bear catching a salmon, was the huge fish.

It crunched down, instantly finishing off the Ichthyosaur’s struggles and turned back to the shoreline.

Elle sucked in a huge breath and let it out slowly. “Yes.” She began to smile, and walked casually back down the steel corridor and

entered the command room. Anne was staring at her, and Troy turned to look over his shoulder.

"It worked." She nodded and smiled. "Brilliant plan, *and* execution."

Troy slumped back in his chair. "Thank God." He sighed long and loud. "Now, we can go home." He grinned. "And guess what? I guess we can dive."

Back in their cave grotto, Troy, Anne, and Elle stood around the open containment unit and Troy reached in to lift the shards of broken ruby.

He laughed softly but with little humor. "Well, we guessed they were like batteries. And putting them under strain drained them. Or this one, anyway."

"And no recharging them," Elle added. "If this happens to another one while we are out in the freezing North Sea, we'll be finished."

"We need a plan B," Anne said.

"No, we need another gemstone," Elle replied.

Anne looked about to say something but shut her mouth.

"Yeah, I agree, but at least two," Troy replied. "One to replace the worn out one. And another as a spare." He looked up. "Call it life insurance."

"We know where they are. We can get them and be back in a few days," Elle said. "But Anne should stay here in case your girlfriend returns."

"What? Bullshit," Anne protested. "Stop trying to cut me out of everything. And anyway, who elected you mission controller?" She turned to Troy. "We know where they are, and Elle should stay because she speaks Yrsa's language far better than I can. I can't understand every second thing she says."

"Because you don't try." Elle folded her arms. "Maybe you..."

"Knock it off," Troy groaned. "I'll go by myself."

"No you won't." Elle's brows snapped together. "One of us is coming with you. To keep you alive. I, *we*, need you."

He looked at both women. Elle was athletic and would move the fastest. But there was something that made him not yet fully trust her. Anne was reliable and had saved him more times than he could count. Besides, she was right. If Yrsa did return, it would be better if Elle was here to talk with her. And talk fluently.

"Anne, you're coming. We'll grab something to eat, pack our kits, and take straight off." He turned back to Elle. "Hopefully we'll back in a few days."

He leaned closer and lowered his voice. "If Yrsa does come back, tell her, *uh*, just tell her to wait for us."

"You mean to wait for you." Elle gave him a crooked smile. "I will. I

promise.”

EPISODE 19

Come not between the dragon, and its wrath – William Shakespeare

CHAPTER 10

West coast, fjordlands of Norway

Senior Detective Bjorn Lomberg and Detective Andrej Hansen were kept busy with multiple sightings of great creatures moving in the waterways or coming ashore at night. There were also reports of missing fishermen and boats vanishing. Both men knew that those boats and fishermen would never be seen again.

And there were more of the massive tracks coming up onto the land, and in one case they entered a coastal field containing a herd of cows, forty of them. Now there was nothing remaining except scraps of hair and some puddles of degraded flesh that forensic examination told them probably was the remains of some of the bovines.

"Fourteen hundred pounds. Each." Lomberg turned. "Times forty is over fifty thousand pounds of meat."

"In one night," Hansen replied. "How big must it be by now?"

"Maybe too big for us to deal with." Lomberg turned back to the shoreline.

He and Hansen stood at the edge of a field and looked down at the tracks. They were six miles north of Salhus on the west coast and it seemed whatever the animal was it was growing exponentially, and now moving out from the fjords.

This time they had brought some scientific expertise – a zoologist and a paleontologist. Both were crouched as they examined the tracks, measuring the size and depths, and making plaster casts.

Eillen Hjardan retracted her tape measure and sat back on her haunches. She looked up at the detectives but said nothing.

"Well?" Lomberg asked after another moment.

"Well, the biggest modern elephant recorded was an African savanna elephant that weighed in at twenty-four thousand pounds. It left footprints twenty inches across and sunk into the soil around four inches." She pointed. "This creature is significantly bigger and heavier than that by a factor of five or six times."

"It wasn't nearly that big only a week ago," Hansen muttered. "It's getting bigger, and at a faster rate."

"You eat 50,000 pounds of meat you're going to convert that protein to mass," Hjardan replied.

Lomberg exhaled. "And do you have any idea..."

"No, no idea." Hjardan rose to her feet. "I might have said a crocodile due to the claw-toed print pattern. But it's not that. It's nothing I've ever seen or heard of." She half smiled. "I hate that it's attacking people. But I can't help be extremely intrigued; it seems to

be a new species.” She turned to look at her colleague who was down low over the print. “Or the return of a very old one. What do you think, Eric?”

Eric Vanborg nodded. “It is certainly big enough to be a saurian. But...” he pointed with his pen, indicating interesting things on the print. “There are four toes instead of three. Most of the dinosaurs that were carnivores had four toes, but only walked on three toes, leaving three-toed prints.”

He looked up and nodded to Hjardan. “I can see why you thought it was crocodilian, as they left four and sometimes five toed prints.” He turned to the senior detective. “And it’s a carnivore.”

“Definitely,” Lomberg replied.

“I’m just throwing this out there, but could it have been a crocodilian throwback, like a *Deinosuchus*?” Hjardan asked.

“I like your thinking. They were forty-five feet long and weighed up to ten tons. Luckily for us they died out 75 million years ago.” Vanborg smiled up at her. “And you’re right the prints do look similar, but, what’s missing?”

“The tail,” Hjardan replied.

“Correct, crocodiles have a splayed gait and the tell-tale drag mark of a long tail.” He looked down at the tracks. “If this thing had a tail, it’s not dragging it. So maybe something else. Something far rarer, or far older.”

“*Hmm*, pre dinosaur,” Hjardan mused.

“There were things before dinosaurs?” Lomberg asked.

Vanborg rubbed his chin with the pencil. “Sure were, and if we go back a long way, to say the Permian period, between 299 to 251 million years ago, before the dinosaurs, we have a group of creatures called synapsids. At that time they were the largest terrestrial carnivores on our planet.” He pointed to the ground. “And all left similar prints to these.”

“So, we might be looking for a *sina*, ah, *sinaksid*.” Hansen raised his eyebrows.

“*Synapsid*,” Vanborg corrected. “They were big but never got this big. As an example, the *dicynodont Lisowicia bojani*, was about the biggest synapsid that ever lived and grew to about twenty thousand pounds. It looked like a hippopotamus with a beak. But they never got anywhere near as big as this creature. And remember, dinosaurs have been gone for 66-million years. But synapsids have been gone for a quarter of a billion.”

“This is giving me nothing.” Lomberg exhaled impatiently. “I still have no answers.”

“Then I’ll give you a few,” Vanborg replied. “This thing seems to be semi aquatic. It’s large, powerful, and a carnivore. It’s also

aggressive.” His expression was deadpan. “And one more thing, Detective. We know it is growing rapidly, and that sort of growth requires a lot of food. And that food now seems to be us.”

Lomberg sucked in a deep breath, filling his lungs, and then let it out in a low growl. “It’s on the move. It’s come out of the fjords and is now somewhere along the coast.”

“It’s looking for something. Maybe more food, a place to hibernate, or a mate,” Hjardan said. “The creature needs to be trapped soon, before it gets anywhere near a heavily populated area.”

Lomberg turned to Hansen. “What’s the closest village from here?”

Hansen looked in to his ever-present notebook. “Salhus, just eight miles down the coast. Population three hundred.”

Lomberg nodded. “We need to have some of the national guard posted there with heavier weapons than sidearms. And I want some spotters along the coast. If it comes ashore, we’ll kill it.” He began to turn away.

“Detective Lomberg, wait. This thing has never been seen before. We must study it. Can we at least try and capture it first?” Hjardan asked.

“This thing is a monster.” Lomberg turned back. “You can study its corpse.”

Eillen Hjardan folded her arms, her lips pressed into a thin line.

Hansen joined Lomberg and the pair stared out over the cold, blue Fjordlands’ waters for several minutes. Hansen turned to his superior.

“Maybe it’s had its fill and will go back to where it came from.” He closed his notebook.

“No.” Lomberg drew in a deep breath and let it out slow. “No, I think this thing has only just begun to torment us. We need to find and kill it. Before it kills us all.”

The dragon came ashore in the middle of the night on the east coast of Vega Island, just four miles from the western coast of Norway.

The tiny island was forty-two square miles of verdant grassed land sticking from clear, blue water that was deceptively inviting but was bone chillingly cold. There were fields of pink wildflowers, flocks of geese, and a few cows milling about on grass so green it looked like it had been painted by a Dutch artist.

It was summer and the kids had come home from school. A few brave ones jumped from the dock into the water, and some families even picnicked and swam at the small, sandy beaches.

But it was night now. Moonless and dark. And the creature lumbered up on top of a rise to stare down over the land. It was not yet fully grown, but still huge at fifty feet and around forty tons. It was hungry all the time, but knew that stealth was best when hunting.

It sought out the remote places where herds of the small, warm animals lived. And standing on the cliffs it saw the glow of lights from the first of the villages.

There were five villages on the island, ranging in size from four-hundred-and-fifty people in Gladstad, and down to just fifty living in Kirkoy. All up, at its summer peak the island had a population of around seven hundred.

And none of them knew of the horror that had just arrived on their idyllic homeland.

A week later Detective Lomberg sipped coffee, smacked his lips, and felt a sense of growing calm. The irate calls from his superiors had quietened down now that the invisible beast from the fjordlands had stopped terrorizing their shores.

As far as he was concerned if it drowned, starved, or was caught in someone's fishing net he couldn't care less. Even if it moved off to one of their neighbors, he'd still be happy. Just as long as it left them alone.

There came a knock on his door, and he looked up to see through the glass panel beside the door to see the pale face of his younger detective. Lomberg didn't like the look of it.

He waved him in. "What is it?" He sat back.

"The island of Vega..." The young man just stared, his mouth working but no words coming for a moment. And then: "It's back."

"Did we do a flyover?" Lomberg asked.

He and Hansen were in the lead boat. With them was their science advisors, Eric Vanborg and Eillen Hjardan, plus a doctor. In the second boat were four heavily armed members of the tactical squad, all armed with HK416 assault rifles, stun grenades, and sidearms.

He and Hansen had just drawn the heavier Sig Sauer P320 pistols with high-capacity magazines from the police armory. Lomberg had no idea if the creature was still on the island, but he wanted to be ready for anything.

"We did a brief flyover in a chopper but saw nothing. I mean, no sign of the creature." Hansen turned. "Also, no sign of life. But a lot of destruction."

Lomberg sighed. "We were looking in the wrong places." He faced Hjardan. "You said it was only semi aquatic. It's four miles from the mainland to this island. That's a long swim in anyone's book."

Eillen Hjardan nodded. "I also said it was an unknown species. Until I examine it, we have no real idea what it is capable of."

They were coming in to a wharf beside one of the small beaches.

"There." Vanborg pointed.

The tracks coming up out of the water above the high tide line were unmistakable, and enormous.

“By that gait, I’d say our creature is at least twenty-five feet wide,” Vanborg said. “Getting even bigger.”

“It’s feeding well,” Hjardan replied.

“Because the devil is feeding on us.” Lomberg scowled.

Hjardan followed the tracks from the beach, lifting her gaze to spot the broken trees and torn up bushes on the hillside. “It went up there.”

Lomberg nodded to a dirt road. “The closest town, Valla, is that way. The road will be quickest.”

The boats came in on the beach and rode up a few feet onto the sand.

“You follow the road,” Hjardan replied. “We need to follow the creature. We need to understand what it is doing. How it is tracking and making its decisions. The more we know about it, the more it will allow us to understand it, and perhaps help us anticipate what it will do next.”

“I’m coming with you,” Vanborg said.

“Fine. Stay in contact.” He briefly held up his walkie talkie. “We’ll see you in the village. From what I understand there might not be a hurry to get there.” He turned. “Doctor, you come with us. Initial reports told us not to expect survivors, but who knows.” He turned to the tactical squad members who had assembled on the beach and waved an arm. They nodded in return.

The groups split, with Lomberg leading the larger team at a fast pace along the roadway. They had just under a mile to travel to Valla. It was a pretty little village where no one bothered to lock their doors. It was probably the first one the beast encountered.

Lomberg turned and saw Eillen Hjardan and Eric Vanborg scaling the hill – it was hard going as it was steep and mostly rocks with grass growing between them.

Hjardan turned and gave him a wave. He did the same in return, and then rounded the bend. He had a sinking feeling in his stomach.

Eillen Hjardan and Eric Vanborg made it to the top of the hill in twenty minutes. Hjardan puffed heavily, even though she was a cross country jogger and strong hiker. She straightened and placed her hands on her hips and sucked in the still cool summer air.

Vanborg joined her. “Good view.”

“I know.” She walked a few paces and stood looking down at the ground. “I think the creature thought so too.” She pointed. “Look. All the crushed gravel; it paused here.”

“You think it was getting its bearings or choosing its first target?”

he asked.

She looked along the path of pulverized debris. "Definitely choosing its target. It knew exactly what it was doing." She looked toward the small town of Valla probably three quarters of a mile from them. "Valla is the closest, but it didn't go there."

Hjardan turned. In the distance there was smoke rising from the larger settlement of Gladstad where there was a population of around seven hundred.

"It went there, the bigger town." She pulled out her walkie talkie.

Vanborg nodded. "Where the most meat was."

"Got it," Lomberg said into the walkie talkie. "We're nearly in Valla. Looks all busted up. We'll check it out and see you in Gladstad." He signed off and turned to Hansen. "They think the beast headed to Gladstad first. The place with the biggest population. Then it swung back to Valla." He exhaled. "I don't like it."

"Because it attacked and killed the most people straight up?" Hansen asked.

"Yes, but that's not it. I don't like that this creature is showing premeditation and planning," Lomberg replied. "I think it started its attack on the largest population in case the other towns managed to flee. This way, it got the most food up front."

"A thinking monster," Hansen groaned. "That makes it even more dangerous."

The group of seven men stopped at the town outskirts. Captain Oskar Villers, who was the senior member of the Special Forces team, had the detectives and doctor wait while they quickly and efficiently scoured the village.

In minutes more, Lomberg's radio crackled to life and he got the all clear. They headed in.

Eillen Hjardan and Eric Vanborg stood at the edge of the village of Gladstad. It was home to around seven hundred people, and the center seemed to be little more than a church, a gas station, and a mini mall. The housing was spread out all around the center up like the spokes of a wheel and to one side up and over a small hill.

"It's quiet," Hjardan said softly.

She felt the need to whisper even though there was not a soul in sight. She looked around and then up. In fact, there wasn't a person, a dog, cat, even a bird flying overhead. Even the breeze seemed to be holding its breath.

"Look at the mall," Vanborg said.

"I see it," she replied.

The side of the long building was caved in as well as the roof. All

the bricks were inside, and the corrugated iron roof had been peeled back like tinfoil. It looked like a wrecking ball had been swung into it.

“What say we start there,” Eillen said.

The pair crouch-ran across the field and then across the road to arrive at the side end of the mall. They had their backs to the bricks, and looked up and down the street, but there was still no sound or movement.

“There, by the car,” Vanborg said.

There was a stain on the ground that looked as if something glutinous had been spilled, but then brushed away. Or, as they now knew, licked up.

What made it more horrifying was the pair of shoes at one end, with something red still in them. They could guess what.

“Just like in Hommelstø.” Her mouth turned down in disgust.

“Yes, the digestive juices. I can still smell them,” Vanborg replied.

“Let’s go. Quietly now.” Eillen turned and then ran down to the broken open end of the mall.

They had no weapons, and only a few scientific sample kits plus a flashlight each. Both pulled out the long black mag flashlights, that at least would serve as a club. But Eillen knew if the beast they were looking for was still around, and as big as they expected, this would be a futile response to an attack.

They headed in, and inside was the chaos they expected with shelves flattened, and some crushed down to small splinters and dust. The remnants of more bodies were scattered everywhere – mostly melted. But some of the people looked to have been consumed straight up as flesh and blood. It seemed the beast had a taste for both fresh and liquified.

Eillen looked away when she saw the upended pram, not wanting to think about the fate of the mother, and baby that had occupied it.

The pair searched more houses and either they were empty and abandoned, or the people had been obliterated and consumed.

“They’re all gone.” Vanborg’s shoulders sagged. “There were around seven hundred people here. Surely someone must have got away.”

“Maybe they scattered into the surrounding hills. Maybe they’ll come on back if we signal.” She held a hand over her eyes to shield them from the rising sun. “But first, let’s make sure the creature is gone.”

“The church across the road looks like it was attacked.” Vanborg nodded to the white building over the street. “Other than the mall, it’s one of the biggest places in town. Or was.”

They ran across the road and headed up the stone steps and then into the church. The entire front had been torn away, and then maybe its edges dug out.

Eillen thought that was a good approximation of what probably happened, as it reminded her of those giant anteaters that tore apart termite nests, digging in to get at the juicy insects inside to devour them – like here – because the monster had dug into the church to get at the meat that was huddling inside.

There were more nightmares to be discovered – there was remains of perhaps a hundred people that looked to have been all huddled together, or maybe scraped into a pile.

“And what rough beast, its hour come round at last, Slouches towards Bethlehem,” Vanborg quoted almost reverently. “They thought they could find refuge here.”

“When the beast comes, then why not turn to God for help?” she sighed dismally. “It didn’t work.”

All the pews had been flung up and out of the way and at the center of the church was a giant, gloopy stain and the remains of shoes, torn clothing that was just fragments of stained and melted fibers, plus some hair, jewelry, and a few walking sticks. But everything else, all the meat, had been licked up and consumed.

“Those poor people. Huddling in here in the dark, as the creature rammed its way in,” Vanborg said. “Then it caught them or collected them into a pile to eat all at once – a feast.”

Eillen coughed and blinked, holding an arm up over her lower face. “Let’s get out of here, this place is making me feel sick.”

Vanborg nodded, his own eyes streaming from the acidic stink. “We’ll check in with the detectives. And then join them. Maybe they have found some survivors.”

“What we need is to find this creature quickly. As it gets bigger it needs bigger sources of food – that means bigger towns.” She looked up at her colleague. “And right now, I’m agreeing with Lomberg – let’s study it when it’s dead.”

Lomberg stared at what remained of the tiny village of Valla. The several dozen houses were primarily made of wood. The same for the few stores and the fishing sheds down near the water. But everything was gone, smashed to matchsticks, and ground into the earth.

“It’s like a hurricane blew through here,” Hansen said, “And just took everything.”

“And everyone,” Lomberg added.

His walkie talkie crackled to life and he lifted it. “Doctor Hjardan.”

He listened to the scientist’s report and sighed. “I understand. We’ll wait for you here.” He turned to Hansen. “You heard?”

His fellow detective nodded, and then turned to the coast. “I’m assuming the other villages will be the same if Gladstad is gone.”

“We’ll need to check the other villages out. If we can find just one

person, it will be..." He sighed and shrugged, "At least not a total massacre."

The group waited for the scientists. Lomberg had dispatched the Special Forces team to the other villages – Kirkoy first, then Holand. Both were small, and no one expected the results to be any different from what they had encountered so far.

In another half hour, Hjardan and Vanborg arrived back, and gave them a fuller briefing. It was as bad as they expected.

"I'd like to tell you it can't get any worse than this," Hjardan said. "But it's getting bigger, hungrier, and bolder. It must be stopped now, especially before it finds its way to a larger settlement. Because that will be when it gets as bad as can be."

"If it got to somewhere like Bergen with a population of two-hundred-and-eighty-thousand, the loss of life will be... extreme," Valborg said softly.

"Yes, agreed, Doctors. But you could be of great assistance to me if you could help us track it, or at least anticipate where it will go next." Lomberg turned to the placid ocean. "It seems to be very adept at stealth. On water and on land." He raised his hands and turned to Hjardan. "And how did it even know this island was here?"

"Race memory, maybe." Eillen Hjardan walked a few paces away. "This land is old. The island of Vega is old." She turned back. "When it was finally exposed after the last ice age some 13,000 years ago, the hundreds of feet of snow and ice melted away."

She stared out over the water. "The billions of tons of ice and snow gone meant the land actually rose hundreds more feet from the ocean. And then came the people in their skin boats and settled here around 11,000 years ago."

"I never knew that," Lomberg said.

She nodded. "They found a paradise, and somewhere that remained ice free even when parts of the mainland still froze. It was a paradise, abundant with fish, seals, birds." She turned. "Do you know one of the names they gave this place, Detective? *Drekka's hjem* – dragon's home." She hugged herself. "The creature seemed to know this island was here. Why else would it swim four miles off the coast in the darkness to get here?" She placed her hands on her hips. "And I agree; we need to find it before it comes ashore again."

Lomberg's radio crackled again. He lifted it. "Go," he said and listened. He smiled and suddenly looked up. "We've got a survivor."

He brought the walkie talkie to his face. "We're on our way." He nodded west. "Outside of Kirkoy. In an old quarry mine."

The old man sat with hunched shoulders, under a blanket, rocking backwards and forwards, as the group crowded around him.

"I tried to warn them," he muttered with his hands on each side of his head.

Eillen Hjardan knelt in front of him, and gently reached out to touch his arm. "What did you see, Mr. Nilsen, Otto? Tell us."

He slowly looked up with eyes red rimmed and sunken, but not really focused on her. Perhaps he still saw something else.

She squeezed his arm. "Tell us, Otto. Please."

"As soon..." He swallowed, "... as soon as the messages started to fly around that something, *a monster*, was killing and eating people, I tried to get them to all come to the mine." He grimaced. "No one believed what they were being told. They thought it was a prank."

"But it wasn't, was it?" she pressed.

"No. But *I* believed it." His agonized and fatigued gaze then rested on her. "There's an ancient legend, that when *Nidhoggr* returns to *Drekka's hjem*, it will mean the end has begun."

"*Nidhoggr*, the dragon of malice and chaos," she said over her shoulder to Lomberg and the others.

Otto grabbed her hand in both of his, his eyes wild. "I've been waiting for it all my life."

Eillen didn't flinch and just patted his hand. "What did you do, Otto?"

"The old quarry mines were used as bomb shelters during the Second World War. They're still solid. I've even sheltered in them during bad storms," he said and his face crumpled as he began to weep. He shook his head. "They didn't listen. Why didn't they listen?"

"Otto..." Eillen moved her left hand up to his shoulder and held out the steel cup of coffee with the other. "Tell us. Tell us everything you remember."

Otto blinked several times and took the cup in shaking hands, sipping noisily. He lowered it and stared straight ahead at nothing.

"It was dark," he began. "Close to midnight. I was in bed, and Bo..." He began to weep again. "Has anyone seen my dog, Boder?" He looked at each of their faces. "He's black and white."

"We'll look for him," Eillen said. "Go on."

Otto wiped his nose and sniffed deeply. "We were asleep. And we got woken by the sounds. Like explosions." He nodded. "I got out of bed and turned on the radio for the island news. Lars was speaking and he said something about an attack by a monster." He looked up and laughed sourly. "I don't blame everyone; who'd believe that?"

"But you did," Lomberg said. "You remembered the legend."

"Yes, I am descended from Vikings. I believe in the *draug*. I knew it would come one day," Otto grunted softly. "I went outside but saw nothing. But I had a bad feeling. I tried to warn everyone, knocked on doors, but they pushed me away or laughed at me. I didn't know what

to do at first, didn't know what to tell them." His smile was fragile. "Then I remembered the mine, grabbed my pack and went there."

"Go on," Eillen asked.

His eyes stared out from a grimy face that had streaks where his tears had washed away the mine's dust from his cheeks.

Otto spoke without emotion. "On the way there I could see the fires. And then I heard the screams from back in the town. They were my neighbors. Stupid Boder started barking and ran off. Trying to protect me, I think."

He looked up at them for a second. "I started to run then. I got my old binoculars from my pack and looked up to the hillside. And then I saw it coming down to the town." He shuddered and wiped his nose again. "It was as big as a mountain, and its eyes shone yellow like a cat."

Eillen Hjardan and Eric Vanborg glanced at each other and then crowded closer.

"It was *Nidhoggr*." He nodded, his eyes vacant.

"Describe it," Vanborg asked, edging closer.

Otto frowned. "It was bigger and more horrible than those things like in that Jurassic movie, and it had spikes all over it, with a tail that stuck out stiff behind it." He grimaced up at Lomberg. "I saw an eighteen-wheel truck once on the mainland – it was bigger than that."

The old man looked up again to see if there were any skeptical looks. When there weren't, he continued.

"People were running everywhere. Screaming. I had my glasses trained on it, them, and saw some were just in front of it." He grimaced. "It vomited on them, and they screamed and fell over. I saw smoke coming from them, and they jerked around in pain. Then they stopped moving and it stooped down to eat them."

He coughed and then it turned into a deep soul aching sob. "I called Boder but couldn't find him. Did you see him? He's old."

"Not yet," Eillen replied.

He shook his head. "When it got to the first house, it just raked a hole in it, and picked the people out like morsels of food. Ate them whole." He wrung his hands. "I tried to get them to come with me, I swear I did. But people were scared. And when they're scared they don't think, they just act. And the only thing they could do was run or hide in their houses. Or the church."

There was silence for a moment.

"And you went to the mine," Lomberg asked softly. "By yourself."

Otto nodded. "Been there for days. Until you found me." His mouth turned down and he looked like he was working hard not to cry again. "My beautiful island. All my friends, neighbors, my dog, all gone." He looked up and his brows came together. "You have to find it and kill

it.”

“That’s the plan,” Lomberg said.

Otto looked up at Lomberg. “You must hurry while there is only one *draug*.” He clasped his hands together. “Ragnarök is not just a legend. It’s a prophecy.”

There came barking from behind them, and the group spun. A black and white dog with a grey muzzle bounded over some debris, racing in to them.

Otto fell to his knees and held his arms wide. The dog belted in and threw itself into his arms, licking, wriggling, and whimpering.

Otto buried his face in its fur. Then the tears came hard.

CHAPTER 11

Walking the eastern cliffs, Lemuria, deep beneath Greenland

Troy looked back towards the cliffs as they got to the tree line. From there it was impossible to see the steep drop down to their grotto cave, and the waiting Nautilus.

It was energizing to know that the route to their way home was almost within their grasp. And in a few days, if they could quickly recover two more rubies without incident and make it back, they'd be leaving. For good.

"Thinking about home?" Anne asked.

"Reading my mind now." He smiled at her. "We're like an old married couple."

She scoffed. "Yeah, sure, but this marriage has me sharing you with a one-eyed psychopath and a giant."

"More like sharing me with an antique submarine and an island full of monsters." He chuckled. "And yes, I was thinking about getting home. We're so close to leaving, I just have to remind myself to stay focused. Don't want to screw up as we're getting to the finish line."

Troy turned back to stare at the thick forest line. He and Anne both carried the smaller six-foot steel-tipped harpoons. Plus, he had his faithful old gun with its remaining two bullets tucked into his belt. They had one knife between them, two fading flashlights, some matches and they carried minimum supplies and water.

They expected it would take them a day and a half to reach the caves unless they needed to detour because of problems. All being well, there-and-back should be three, and no more than four, days.

"There are two places we've seen dragon eggs – one is in the dragon's lair. The other is the cave leading to the mountain. And those caves pass by the Viking village." Anne tilted her head. "Are you ready for that?"

"Best if we avoid the dragon's den. We have no defenses against it." He turned and reached into his tattered shirt and lifted the medallion the old chieftain had given him. "And though I don't plan on visiting the Vikings, if we do run into them, let's hope this free pass still carries some weight."

"No detours," she warned. "We head to the caves, grab two eggs, and then head back. Time is moving against us. While the gate is open we need to go through it, or we'll be here for at least another year." Her mouth turned down. "And the longer we're here, the more chance there is that our luck will run out. And then..."

"I hear you. And don't worry, that's the plan." Troy turned, hefted

his pack onto his shoulders and headed in. He half turned. "There and back, no detours." He nodded to their route. "We stick to the cliff edge and turn in when we get to the beach." He half smiled. "Follow our old route."

"There and back, then home," Anne said softly.

Elle re-entered the engine room of the Nautilus and tied a rag around her face, just leaving a slit for her eyes. She did the same with her hands, creating mittens. She then quickly moved the debris from in front of the hidden storage room and dragged the heavy steel door open.

The red glow bathed her once again, making her teeth ache and dried her good eye but she deftly used her gloved hands to lift one of the new rubies from within the storage chamber.

She brushed off the dirt that was run through with the glistening, silvery threads. She had found through trial and error that this seemed to be the source of the weird heat and rays she felt. It also came from the rubies, but less so and it was tolerable from them.

She held it up, looking deep into its core – it was clear, blood red, and its beauty was intoxicating.

She brushed away more of the dirt and turned it in her hand. "Magnificent," she whispered.

"Eggs? Bullshit," she sneered and thought that if she was going to be working with them, she needed to clean them off so brushed the dirt completely from the new one, and then cleaned it out of the storage chamber, bagged it, and took it topside to dump all the silvery soil over the side.

When she returned, she saw that *all* the rubies now shone even brighter. She pushed the new one into its cradle slot, and immediately the overhead light became brighter.

She smiled up at them. "Much better." She closed the lid.

They had already been storing some of the dried meat from the small theropod dinosaur that Troy had pushed over the cliff – it wasn't going to be enough for three of them. But it was more than enough just for her. Her water storage was also good, and now that the Nautilus was all gassed up, she was good to go.

She headed back to the hatch, planning to scour their small camp for anything else she might need. She barely gave the fate of Troy and Anne a second thought. But she knew they were resourceful and would learn to survive. After all, they'd been doing it for nearly two years.

She chuckled as she climbed the ladder and stood on the outer deck with hands on her hips. She had to be quick – time was with her now, but she needed to be out through Odin's Gate and pass along the

massive ice rift before it closed again. If things went well, she'd be home in Norway before Troy even got back.

She laughed out loud – once again Troy had underestimated her. He had been so easy. As he had been from the start.

Elle gathered up a spare harpoon, and some of the treated dinosaur hide that Yrsa had been working to make it soft as leather. She didn't know how cold it was going to get out in the North Sea, but a cloak of this stuff should keep her warm.

She examined the hide – it was stubbly and covered in raised lumps, where the huge feather quills had been plucked from it. Elle shook her head and exhaled – she'd be glad to get back home and never see one of these abominations again.

"No more monsters," she whispered.

She draped the hide over her arm and carried the harpoon back to the hatch. Dropping them in, she followed them down.

The sound of the hatch closing with a clank echoed in the cave grotto. In minutes more, there came a hum from inside the Nautilus. And then it pulled away from the rocks.

CHAPTER 12

Portugal, Western Algarve Coastline, Lagos

The four friends piled out of the taxi and looked firstly up at their beautiful old hotel with the wrought iron balcony rails, colored stone, and brilliant colored bougainvillea vines twining through the railings.

Owen Oxley, and his fiancée Jenny Cutler, both worked at Lloyds; Owen in wholesale banking, and Jenny in legal.

With them was Michael Sandringham who owned a tech-trading company and his girlfriend, Madeline Warrington, a nurse, who he'd met when Michael broke his leg after falling off a motorbike.

The taxi cab driver helped unload their numerous bags and the four of them stood in the already growing heat of the mid-morning sun, and all grinned broadly.

"This must be the place," Owen said and rubbed his hands together.

"I'm in heaven," Jenny replied. "Well done, you."

Michael checked his watch. "We've got an hour to kill before our boat is booked for hire. Let's check in."

"That doesn't leave us much time... for anything else." Madeline smiled seductively up at him.

He leaned down to kiss her. "Are you kidding?" He kissed her again. "I can go three times in ten minutes."

She slapped his chest and slid an arm around his waist. The four of them lifted their bags containing clothing, travel toiletries, and the bulk was their diving equipment. They knew they could hire locally, but they had the best diving kit in their world, and even their rebreathing equipment wasn't the usual bulky, cylindrical air tank, but the more streamlined unit that were light, fail-proof, and carried an hour's air.

They checked in and headed to their rooms; they had booked the best and were offered a room for each couple with a balcony that looked over the beaches and cliff coastline.

Madeline and Michael dropped their bags and stepped out in the small flower-covered balcony and leaned on the iron railing. She inhaled the salt and sea air.

"Beautiful," she said as she looked out over the sparkling bay. Even as the water got deeper she could still see the weed patches and reefs, and the white, yellow, and gold limestone cliffs created wonderful shapes and had been weathered into keyhole caves and grottos just around the headland.

The sand on the beaches was nearly pure white and already people were spreading towels and setting up into large striped umbrellas.

“Wreck or cave first?” Madeline asked.

Michael sipped from a bottle of water. “Wreck.” He nodded up toward the sun. “In an hour it’ll be overhead, and that’s perfect for the wreck dive. As it moves toward the west it’ll throw light into the underwater caves.”

“Ahh...” She nodded. “I see – much better for visibility.”

He shrugged. “The water is like glass anyway, but there’s nothing like natural light to show off the coral and fish colors.”

In another hour they met out front and were all kitted out. None of them wore wetsuits as the water was around 75-degrees this time of year. But the sunshine could be punishing so they wore nylon body swim suits that went from neck to wrist to knee.

All had weight belts, dive knives, and also their face masks had GoPros on the bridge above the eyes – they planned on recording everything and editing it into a cool short movie for their social media pages when they got home.

The group already had their rebreathers on their backs and carried their large three-foot-long swim fins with them.

Madeline admired Michael in his tight-fitting suit, but Owen Oxley, or the ‘Ox’ as he was known to his friends, carried a bit of extra weight. His shoulders and arms were huge, attesting to a lot of strength and were a hangover from his school rugby days as a front row forward. However, when the rugby had finished, his huge appetite obviously hadn’t.

Jenny looked like a stick beside him, and both she and Michael wondered how he didn’t break her in two when they were making love.

They followed Michael down the stone path to cross the sand to an area where several small boats were waiting for their guests. Each boat had a man resting on it, and they held signs with names drawn on them.

“Sandringham.” Michael pointed and waved.

The man waved in return, gave Michael some brief instructions about the motor, the gas, and the fish and reef finder. He also gave them a brief warning about currents as some divers had been reported missing lately.

Madeline saw that Michael listened patiently but knew that look on his face and bet he discarded the news, as they were all strong swimmers and knew there were no sharks in the area.

The man then held the boat as they jumped in, then pushed them out and stood waving on the sand.

The steel boat was bigger than a little open runabout and had a steering wheel and small cabin, but was basically an upmarket dinghy. They powered away from the beach and headed up the coast and also

around a quarter mile out from the shore looking for the landmarks and watching the reef-finder as they hopefully headed toward the sea bottom wreck.

Madeline wore a straw hat and kept one hand on top as they cut the azure water. There was no wind so thankfully no bounce on the seats that had plastic-covered foam pads but still hurt her ass bones.

Further out they saw another boat similar to theirs that had a flag up, indicating divers down.

“Bummer, we’re not going to be alone,” Madeline huffed.

Michael slowed the boat and Owen looked over his shoulder at the reef finder.

“Reefs,” Owen said. “I’m betting that boat is right over the wreck.”

“Yep.” Michael nodded. “Wonder how long they’ve been down.” He slowed right down and travelled over the reef pointing at the sea bottom bathymetry on the scanner. “And there it is.”

He kept going a few hundred feet. “We’ll give the other guys some space.”

He let out the anchor rope and it slid down the sixty feet to the bottom. Over the side the water was a magnificent blue and they could still make out the dark patches of reef below.

The group quickly finished their kit up, pulling masks down, checking their rebreather’s air flow and pipes, and then doing a quick buddy-check on each other’s.

Michael then raised the red and white diving flag and sat on the edge. He held the mouthpiece in one hand, his lips forced into a duck pout from the swim mask edge.

“See you down there.” He pushed in his mouthpiece and let himself fall backwards. Jenny followed immediately, then Owen then Madeline.

Together the four of them slowly finned down to the sea bottom, following their anchor rope. Once there Michael pointed at the rise of the ship – a sixty-foot steel-hulled vessel that had been sunk in the 80s to create an interesting dive site.

They quickly headed over. It was tilted to one side and heavily crusted with seaweeds, corals, and mollusks, and in the clear water, lying on a patch of near luminescent white sand, it looked like something from a haunted sea, a ghost ship just waiting for its spectral crew to return, walking slowly along the sea bottom and being led by the legendary Jack Sparrow.

Madeline hung in the water and turned slowly – the visibility was unbelievable, and the sand rippled with bands of light, like moving tiger stripes travelling off in all directions. The only marks on the seabed were what looked like a ten-foot-wide drag mark leading away, further up the coast. She wondered if a large stingray could

have made them and made a mental note to ask Michael later.

Madeline switched on her GoPro and took some pictures of them. Then she peered in through one of the portholes. The inside was not as weed-encrusted as the outside of the ship, so would make for an interesting exploration.

Each of them glided in through a different door or hatch, checking ghostly passageways, looking behind doors, and even taking pictures of each other sitting on old weed-encrusted chairs.

After another five minutes, Madeline started to grow bored, and after thinking about why, she concluded that there was no fish, no eels, not even any crustaceans over the size of her little finger.

The hotel they were staying in had told them that anything they caught they could present to the kitchens and the chef would cook it for them. Michael had promised her they'd be having a lobster each that evening and so far, all she'd seen was a few small shrimps, waving feelers at her as though signaling an incoming aircraft for landing.

She glided back out and along the tilted deck preparing to find Michael when she saw leaning up against the lower gunwale a single swim fin.

She swam over and lifted it – it was new, but slightly damaged. There was a large half circle scar on the tip of the fin. It looked as large around as her open hand.

Madeline looked about, seeing if there was anything else. But there was nothing.

Weird, she thought. Maybe it fell overboard.

She hung onto it, and spotted Michael with Jenny and Owen and pointed upwards. Michael nodded and the group ascended once again, following the anchor rope up to the stern of the boat where a small metal ladder awaited them.

Climbing in they pulled masks and fins off and shared stories about what they had seen. And didn't see.

"Beautiful, but like a desert down there," Michael said. "I've never seen tropical water so devoid of sea life."

Michael took the swim fin Madeline had found and examined it. He looked at the large round scar on the rubber and then traced his finger along it and then lifted it to his nose and sniffed.

"Phew." He wrinkled his nose. "Yeah, like you said, maybe it fell overboard. Or they tossed it because the rubber stinks." He shrugged.

"From there?" Madeline pointed to the other boat still floating with the dive flag up.

Owen stared at the boat for a moment and scratched at his whiskered chin. "Where were those guys?"

Jenny grimaced. "They told us there were no sharks in the area,

right?"

"Only tiny sharks in these parts. Might get a large tiger now and then, but very rare." Michael looked at the flipper again. "But the size of this fin makes me think it was a very small man, or a woman."

"Surely there was more than one person. Let's have a look," Owen said.

Michael started the motor and in seconds they were alongside the other craft and saw two sets of clothing, hats, and shoes – one man and one woman.

"So, two people. That makes me think it was really unlikely to be a shark attack," Michael announced. "Not deep enough to get the bends." He shrugged. "Maybe the current."

"Did anyone else see that mark on the sand?" Madeline asked. "Looked like something was dragged. Something big."

The others shook their heads.

"Maybe they've been doing some dredging," Michael suggested, and grinned. "Keeping the sea bottom pristine for us spendy tourists." He laughed.

"Maybe." Madeline looked away.

"Anyway, I say we can call it in when we get back," Owen said. He put a hand over his eyes. "The sunlight is perfect now for the caves. Let's finish our diving."

Madeline groaned. "I don't feel comfortable not calling this in immediately." She turned back to the small boat.

"My thoughts are that if they drowned, which I think is unlikely, then an extra hour or two isn't going to make any difference," Owen said. "We vote. Who's for finishing our dive then calling it in? Or going back in now? Left hand dive on. Right hand go in now." He raised his left hand.

One after the other they raised their left hands. Even Madeline. She guessed that Owen was right; an extra hour would make no difference now. But they were only here a few days and might never get here again.

"Then dive on it is," Michael said with a broad grin.

He started the boat.

The small boat powered up the coast, staying just on fifty feet from the magnificently colored cliffs.

Madeline held her hat down hard on her head and looked up at the weathered rock edifices showing colorful, sedimentary lines that told of uplifting crust, and rock folding as if it was little more than clay.

They didn't have to travel far before they came to a large archway leading into a small, deserted bay. They could just see a sandy beach inside without a soul on it.

"We should have brought a picnic," Jenny remarked.

"And a few beers," Owen added.

"I think you've had too many already." Jenny slapped his stomach.

"Hey, give me a break, I'm on holiday," he protested with a grin.

They dropped anchor and prepared for their dive. Already the salt had crusted their foreheads and necks, and the heat made all of them look forward to being back in the water.

Michael pointed. "We head in through the arch, and there's supposed to be caves running underneath the cliff edges. We can make our way along inside them, and then all meet up on the little beach. Sound good?"

"Sure does," Jenny replied and rubbed Owen's huge shoulder through his skin suit.

This time, Michael took a catch bag, and he was the only one to take a dive knife this time. Each of them strapped a light to their wrists for any of the darker caves. However, they expected them not to be long and usually had light beams bouncing around inside them.

Michael tucked the bag into his belt. Madeline could tell by the set of his jaw he was determined to catch each of them a lobster.

"Lobster for dinner?" she chuckled.

"Lobster for dinner or die trying." He winked at her.

One after the other they went over the side and like a pod of large fish they glided downwards. Once they reached the bottom they firstly broke into pairs; Owen and Jenny heading in a little further, and Madeline and Michael swimming toward the nearest cliff wall.

Madeline loved the way the sunlight created rippling waves on the arms of her suit, and she watched as Michael moved in under one of the rock shelves and hanging fronds of kelp and weed.

He drew his dive knife and used it to part the seaweeds and began to poke into crevices. He was straight into his crustacean search, but she had confidence in him as he had a knack for ferreting them out.

She continued on a little further and could still hear the chink of Michael's knife blade on rock as she peered into one of the caves. She saw then that some of the caves had much better light inside where their roofs had collapsed perhaps centuries ago and created beautiful little fantasy swim lagoons, some where you could come to the surface and take a breath in your own private water-filled cathedral.

She came up inside one now, and saw a few small red crabs hunker down as her head broke the surface.

She looked up. It was about fifty feet to the top, and she wondered whether someone had climbed it before and would have loved to know what the view was like if you got up there.

Oddly there were less crabs and shellfish than she expected, and she was about to dive back down when she saw the gouges in the weeds –

four long strokes, and fresh, as if someone's hand had raked down and torn away the seaweed and mosses. And then again about eight feet further up.

Maybe someone *had* tried to climb it, she thought. But obviously slipped.

She put the rebreather mouthpiece back in and submerged and swam toward the mouth of her cave. As she neared the exit, once again she could hear the chink of steel on rocks and grinned around her mouthpiece, wondering if Michael had managed to find a single lobster yet.

As she was about to come from the darkness of the cave mouth to the blue light outside, something passed by outside, fast, that shut out the light momentarily. She stopped dead and looked out, but there was nothing, and there was now total silence.

Her brain told her it might have been a boat moving between her and the sunlight, but it was too quick, and too silent. And it seemed to pass below the surface. Had to be a cloud, she guessed.

Madeline floated in the bath-warm water; it was a dream being down here, but once again, she couldn't help noticing that there were no large fish or crustaceans. She'd go and check on Michael and see if he had any luck. But she couldn't hear his blade on rock anymore so he either had success or had given up.

She glided back to where she had left him, and noticed the water was a bit cloudy as if something had been dumped into it. As she hung in the water, she saw Michael's dive knife on the bottom.

She swam over to retrieve it, and looked down at it, turning it over, trying to understand what it meant. He must have dropped it. He'll be pissed, she thought.

She turned about, using her fins to spiral in a slow circle. *Where is he?* she wondered.

She stuck the knife in her dive belt and swam along the rock wall. She then turned back and swam a little faster in the direction Owen and Jenny had taken, and after five minutes gave up as well and came to the surface.

She pushed her mask up and turned slowly; there was nothing but their boat at the large archway entrance. And also no one lazing on the beach either.

She took out her mouthpiece. "*Hell-ooo!*" she shouted.

The word echoed back at her in the horseshoe-shaped grotto.

Fuck this, she whispered.

There was one last place she could check that had the top of a large cave showing above the water, and she bet if Owen or Michael had a choice that would be where they'd want to explore. And Jenny would of course go with them.

She'd check that out first, then head up on the beach and wait for them, rather than just endlessly playing tag.

Madeline swam back down to the bottom and headed toward the cliff wall and the large cave. Once again the pristine water was a little murky here, and she wondered if there had been some sort of spill or runoff. Could there be illegal dumpers dropping stuff in here? She wouldn't put it past some people who would place profit over and above a pristine environment every time.

She headed closer to the wall and saw the large dark mouth of the cave. This one had no light showing at its rear and she bet the roof was still intact.

She hovered for a moment just staring in.

For some reason she didn't like it. It just felt *wrong*.

She flicked on her wrist light and shone it inside – there was nothing of interest showing, other than similar weird drag marks that reminded her of those she had seen at the dive wreck – she had her doubts this time that it was a stingray – the big ones preferred open water, not caves.

She continued to stare into the cave. She wished she could phone, text, or find some way to contact her friends. *Damn Michael*, she thought. He was always charging ahead and not thinking about her.

She knew that wasn't true, but her frustration was rising in line with her trepidation. She was nervous and pissed off that she was nervous. *Toughen up*, she demanded, and started in.

Madeline held her wrist-light arm out in front of her and swam slowly with eyes wide behind her mask. The bottom went from sand to rocky floor very quickly, and she saw that it was also devoid of sea plant growth, but not because it never had it, but more that it had been scoured clean.

This cave was quite big, a dozen feet wide at least and probably more than that above her head. She just wished the water wasn't so cloudy inside – what was that murkiness from? She hoped it wasn't something toxic leaking into the water that might give her a rash, and she was damn sure she'd report it when she got back.

In a few more seconds she found the first swim fin. This one wasn't a match to the one she had found at the wreck and looked big, a man's fin.

Then she found a scrap of neoprene, like from a wetsuit. A little further on she saw a swim mask with the strap broken and glass cracked.

Her heartbeat raced. It had a GoPro on top and looked like it might have belonged to Owen. She snatched it up and swam on.

It was then that she saw them.

The skulls.

All piled up.

But not just skulls as there were heads, one still wearing a dive mask and eyes grotesquely rolled back.

Madeline was confused at first, not understanding what she was seeing or what it meant.

And her body continued to glide closer. It was then that she saw why the water was cloudy. Because one of the heads with most of the ragged neck still attached looked like it had been torn off and was leaking blood, with the murky cloud thickest at the neck's stump.

It was a pyramid of skulls and heads, stacked there like a pile of child's toys, and right at the top, his head resting on its side, was Michael's head. His mouth still frozen in a grimace of pain and the eyes screwed shut.

Beneath it was Jenny's, her face almost restful as if she had just fallen asleep, and then beside that another woman's, ghostly pale, perhaps the one who had lost the small blue swim fin from the orphaned boat they came across.

As she stared, rivetted to the spot, in shock, one of the heads moved. Or rather was placed upright by something hiding behind them. Maybe by something that had been watching for her reaction to the horror the entire time she hung there.

She screamed then, into her mouthpiece and tasted bile in her throat, and spun away, moving so fast she stirred the water, and her legs felt like they had an electric shock running through them as adrenaline flooded her system.

She kicked hard and fast, knowing she had only come a little way into the huge cave. She couldn't even think what had happened and how. Could there be some sort of psychopath swimming down here who was attacking divers?

But Owen was huge. Who would dare take him on?

Her vision became blurry as she wept in her face mask, and she babbled madly into her mouthpiece about it being a bad dream, and about not being angry with Michael, intermixed with prayers that she could just make it to the small beach.

Madeline zoomed along the bottom with the bright sun-filled water shallowing quickly and when it became too shallow to swim she stood, dragged off her fins and ran the last dozen feet up onto the warm, white sand.

She stopped halfway up, turning one way, then the other – the beach was just a small horseshoe shape, no more than about thirty feet long and ten wide, and all surrounded by steep cliffs climbing up to an open roof fifty or so feet above her.

She suddenly spun back to the water, but instead of seeing the sandy, sun-lit shallows she had just crossed, there was something

there, something huge. It spread out like a large, mottled rug below the water, and also trailing behind was a long object like a shell.

The marks on the sea bottom, she remembered. *This is what did it*. And then: This is what was at the wreck. This is what took the divers from there. It took them all the way back to its home in the cave so it could take their heads for its collection. So it could pile them up and play with them like toys.

She put her hands to each side of her head and grimaced. If only they had gone straight back after the wreck, they would not have encountered it. Instead they walked right into its home.

Madeline tore her eyes away and looked up. "*Help!*" she screamed. Her voice echoed.

She moved along the sand, looking up, and cupping her mouth, screaming longer and louder. "*He-eeelp.*"

She noticed that when she moved down along the beach the huge dark blot in the water stayed with her. It made her feel ill, and cold to the bone, and she knew exactly what it wanted – it wanted her head for its collection.

She still had Michael's dive knife stuck in her belt and she took it out and held it. A pitiful small silver tooth against a monster, easily fifty, sixty feet long, and strong enough to kill Owen, a man who was more than twice her weight and strength.

She stopped moving to face the water; maybe it couldn't come out, she surmised, or rather, hoped. She might be safe as long as she stayed high and dry on the sand.

But looking around she saw that the tide was still coming in. Maybe the entire beach would be gone, and she'd be standing in water. That would spell death.

She turned and looked upwards again. The cliffs were sheer, but they were covered in protrusions, cracks, and some tough-looking vines. She was sure she could climb, and even if she couldn't make it all the way to the top, she saw there were a few ledges higher up she could perch on and stay away from the thing.

Someone would find their boat, and know they were in here. Surely. Also, the hotel would notice they never came back. And they also knew they were going on a diving trip. They'd come looking.

But how long would it take to find her? Days? And Michael had told them they were going to the wreck – coming to the archway beach was their little secret – so they had told no one.

"*Shit, shit, shit.*" Why hadn't she been stronger and demand they head in after the wreck? Because Michael always got his way. Damn him, she ground her teeth.

Then she remembered his torn off head on top of the pile of skulls and felt a wave of depression settle over her. *Sorry Michael*, she

thought dismally.

She looked along the small beach – there was nothing to eat or drink. But she guessed she could make it for several days.

Madeline glanced back over her shoulder. The ever-present huge stain on the sea bottom was still there. She could feel its cold, alien gaze on her, and started to well up again at the thought of Michael and her friends being pulled into its cave, ripped to pieces, and then had their heads...

She turned away from it, walking along the sand and refusing to go there in her thinking anymore.

The sound of dripping water from behind her drew her head around to the ocean and she saw a mottled green tentacle rise from the water. It lifted five feet, seven, ten, and was as thick around as her thigh where it met the water. But she could see there seemed to be a lot more of it on the sea bottom.

Then rising ever so slowly a lump of the slimy, mottled green broke the surface as it came up. It was the head, and was enormous, and the pair of huge disc-shaped eyes on each side of that horrifying head were as big around as car tires. They were slitted like a cat's eyes, and it stared for several seconds.

The sight of the thing froze her with fear, as its bulging eyes looked her over, perhaps wondering how to get to her.

A jet of water shot from the thing to spray her. She jumped back, and another jet shot out at her, spraying her again. It was tormenting her, or maybe playing with her. A bit like a child would poke a stick through the fence at a puppy dog.

It stared for a moment more, then sunk back down, and in a flash, she saw the massive dark blob move across the sea bottom and vanish toward the cave wall, moving unbelievably fast for something so large.

Was it going? she wondered. Had it got bored with her? And when it found it couldn't get to her had given up. A small flower of hope began to bloom in her belly.

She looked out to where the archway in the rocks was that led to the outside ocean. Sunlight still streamed down, and she knew that just another further few hundred feet from that her small boat waited at anchor.

It was a good hundred feet to the arch opening, and it got deeper further out. She wondered if she was very careful and quiet, and stayed close to the opposite cliff wall, she might be able to sneak out.

She took a few steps towards the water and felt her legs tremble. The monster had been so fast though. If it caught her in the water, she would never be able to outrun it. But the undeniable reality was that every day she stayed, she would get weaker. And as no one really

knew where she was, she might be here for a week – seven days without food meant she'd be weak as a kitten. But seven days without water meant she'd be dehydrated and probably cramped and hallucinating. She'd never make it by then.

She looked along the left side cave wall, planning her route.

She remembered poor Michael's last words to her: *Lobster for dinner or die trying.*

"Fuck this, it's die trying," she whispered, and took another few steps to the water's edge.

Suddenly she saw the huge dark stain travelling back along the sea bottom toward her and she backed away quickly.

It stopped a dozen feet from the beach and the huge flowering tentacles spread out and behind it lay the long, weird body.

"What the hell are you?" she whispered.

The devil, her mind whispered back.

Slowly some of its tentacles rose above the water – just two – and on their tips were human heads. One of them was Michael's, and the other belonged to Jenny.

It wore them like finger puppets and held them just at water level.

Madeline began to cry.

"You bastard."

She threw the knife hard, and it slapped into the water above the beast and sank down. If it hit the creature it gave no indication.

It was toying with her again. Tormenting her. Did it think it could trick her into thinking her friends were alive, so she'd go back in the water? Unlikely. It knew what it was doing and was just playing a game. And by the number of heads she had seen stacked up in its cave, it had probably been playing it for a long time.

All those divers who had been reported missing; this is where they ended up. She thought again of the divers taken from the wreck, a man and a woman, probably. That was nearly a mile away. It had travelled there and grabbed them. Did they know what was happening? As they were tucked under its arms and held in its slimy embrace. Were they still alive, looking at each other, but helpless, and knowing what was coming for the entire trip back to its killing cave?

"Nope. Not me. No way." She turned, walking the few paces back up the narrow strip of sand, and grabbed the rock wall. She looked up, and then moved half a dozen paces further down where she spotted better hand grips.

She looked back over her shoulder. "Fuck you and fuck your grotto. I'm out of here."

She began to climb, one, two, three steps up. Already six feet from the sand, and she had spotted her next series of foot and hand holds.

There was the sound of cascading water from behind her, and she

refused to look. Instead she sped up and focused on her climbing and grabbing the next hand hold.

Then she felt something slap against her thigh – cold, wet, and slimy, and there was the weird painful feeling of adhesion as the suckers clamped down.

It curled round her, but only gently.

“No!” she screamed.

It easily plucked her from the wall, and the realization hit her then that it could have come out of the water at any time it wanted to claim her. But chose not to.

Madeline punched down at the revolting, rubbery pipe of muscular flesh holding her. She expected it was going to draw her into the water, and she began to have dizzy spells as she fought to not black out from fear at the thought of the thing pulling her into its razor-sharp beak.

“No, no, no!” She struggled and her tears blurred her vision as she knew it was going to rip her head from her body, perhaps to be the next puppet show for the poor soul trapped in here after her.

But instead it gently placed her on the sand, and then silently withdrew back below the water. Where it stayed, watching her.

Madeline jumped to her feet and backed away until her back hit the cliff wall. She swiped at her thighs trying to wipe away the stinking, acrid slime, and saw she had large red welts on her thigh exactly the same pattern as she had seen scarring the swim fin she had found at the wreck.

The stuff now coated her fingers, and the smell made her eyes sting and reminded her of window cleaner.

Below the clear water, in real close, she could see the huge octopus-thing’s large slitted eyes, unblinking, and watching her.

She slowly sank down to sit. Now she knew; it could have her whenever it wanted. It just wanted to play a little first.

“I’m already dead,” she whispered.

Two days later, and after it became bored with its new toy, the monster *Orthocone cephalopod* added a new head to its growing pile. It rearranged them, and rearranged them again, making them into some pattern or shape only its primitive intelligence understood or appreciated.

It then left them to glide along the bottom like a monstrous shadow out of the grotto arch and to where the small boat was still anchored.

It had learned that it didn’t need to sink them, but instead to just grab onto the anchor chain or rope and pull with all its titanic strength to break it. Once free, the boat was taken by the wind and in a few hours vanished into the distance.

The cephalopod glided back to its lair, knowing others would come.
They always did.

CHAPTER 13

The eastern cliffs, Lemuria, deep beneath Greenland

Troy and Anne passed along the cliff top, mostly watching the line of forest where any danger was more likely to come from, and also glancing from time to time at the sea surrounding their island.

Troy had seen the shape of large marine reptiles just below the surface, and right now there was something that might have been a sea turtle but had to be twenty feet from one side of its shell to the other.

He continued to watch it as its three-foot-wide head broke the surface to take a breath before stroking on. There was so much to see here, so many wonders, and he only wished he could leave, but come back when he wanted.

"That's an *Archelon*. See it?" Anne said, her eyes also on the water. "Huge one; largest sea turtle to ever have existed. Everywhere else it's been extinct since the Late Cretaceous."

"I see it." He half turned. "I was just thinking... be great to get home. But be nice to come back and visit. Still so much to see. All so rare."

"Your mysterious island would not stay so mysterious if everyone knew about it," she replied. "It would be exploited and destroyed in just a few years." She smiled up at him. "But yeah, I'd like to see more too. But, on my own terms." She seemed to think on it a little more. "And as long as I could get home easily after I've visited."

Troy nodded, turning to watch the line of tall trees marking the beginning of the forest. Up ahead the cliffs started to ease down toward the beaches they had first arrived on, and then they'd find the track to follow inland. Once there, it would take them another day to trek their way up to the caves leading down to what looked like the buried impact craters where the rubies were nestled.

It was still only mid-morning, and the forest line was quiet. He hadn't even seen any prey animals so far. There was still a layer of cool mist on the ground and snaking around the huge tree boughs, and in under the broad, hanging palm fronds. Both he and Anne's strategy was to stay quiet, stay small, and move fast.

There and back, no detours, he reminded himself. And he meant it.

"*You damn bitch*," Anne spat.

"*Huh*, what?" he turned to her, his brow creasing, as her words registered, but made no sense.

She was glaring out at the water, her eyes wide and furious in a face twisted in anger. She had an arm lifted to point. He followed where

she indicated, and his mouth dropped open in disbelief. And shock.

"Why is...?" He dropped his harpoon and put his hands to his head. Then ran to the cliff edge.

It looked like the Nautilus, sailing serenely along the coast doing about three knots, and at about five hundred feet out from the shoreline. His mind tried rationalizing it: maybe there was another one. Maybe it had somehow drifted out. But he knew none of those were true.

"Told you that bitch couldn't be trusted," Anne growled. "She played us all this time."

"Why would she...?" he began. "I don't..."

"Oh for God's sake, Troy, she only wanted the stones and a way home, and knew you had a better chance of finding one than she did by herself." Anne sat down, hard. "And now, we're royally screwed." She looked up at him. "Again... and by the same fucking person."

She began to wail, and Troy reached down to grab the shoulder of her tattered shirt. "No, no, get up, we need to follow her."

"Why?" Anne scoffed. "Do you really think she's going to pull in somewhere?"

"Yes." He scowled down at her. "For all we know something chased her out of the grotto. She might be looking for us."

Troy knew in his heart this was a longshot, but he held onto it.

Anne sighed and got to her feet. "Sure, we can follow it. Until we get to watch her sail out through Odin's Gate."

"Hurry." Troy began to jog along the cliff edge with Anne at his heel. She muttered the entire time but he kept his eye on the large fish-like submarine as it began to veer away from the coast.

"No, no, please..." he begged.

But his cries were in vain, because the Nautilus headed straight out toward the distant cave mouth across the water.

Troy slowed and then stopped. And just watched.

The Nautilus never stopped or even slowed, and then the dark iron craft passed into the black hole in the base of the cliff wall. And vanished.

Troy kept his eyes on the water cave mouth for another few minutes, as Anne sat down and crossed her legs.

"She's not coming back, Troy," she whispered.

Troy sunk down and put his head in his hands. After a moment he sucked in a deep breath and lay back. "Well, that's that then."

"How?" Anne asked. "How did she get it working with one of the eggs missing?"

Troy lay there for a moment thinking about it.

He sat up slowly. "Was one missing?" he snorted softly, still straining to see out to where the Nautilus disappeared. "She spent a

lot of time in the engine room by herself.” He turned slowly. “Nemo thought of everything. Travelled the world’s oceans. So of course he would have encountered these things losing power before and needing to be replaced from time to time.”

“Oh-*hhh*...” Anne began to nod slowly. “So there might have been spares stored in there.”

“Yeah, I bet there was,” he said.

“And she found them. And didn’t tell us.” Anne laughed darkly, and her mouth pressed into a hard line for a moment. “I’ve never more wanted to do someone harm in my life.” She scoffed softly. “I mean, I wanted to kill her before when she shot you. But now I want to kill her, bring her back to life, and then kill her again.”

Troy sat staring out at the water as a dark cloud of depression began to settle over him. “I’m so stupid.”

“*We’re* so stupid.” Anne exhaled through her nose. “The two biggest saps on the planet. Abandoned and marooned, again, by Elleanor Burgan, if that’s even her real name.” She reached out to rub his shoulder. “Look on the bright side; at least you weren’t shot this time.”

He laughed darkly and shook his head. “Yeah, there’s always an upside.” He laughed some more. “But you have to look really, really hard to see it sometimes.”

The pair of them sat in silence for a few more minutes before Anne turned to him. “Hey, another bright side; this now makes a trip to get the extra eggs redundant.” She picked up a small stick and broke it in her hands. She tossed the pieces over the cliff. “So, now what?”

Troy sat there breathing calmly and thinking through their options. He had no intention of spending the rest of his life on this island. They’d been here nearly two years already, and Anne was right – sooner or later their luck would run out and he doubted either of them would die of old age in their sleep here.

He decided. “We head back to the grotto...”

“Okay, why?” Anne asked.

“We head back and take any supplies we think we’ll need.” He smiled. “Then we find Yrsa.” Now came the wild part, he thought. “And we convince her and the Vikings to come with us to the Mother of the Sky Mountain again. It’s the only way out for us.”

“It’s the end of summer now. You know that’s a dead end. And I do mean *dead*,” Anne protested. “And by the way, even if you could convince her to come with us, which given how she vanished and why, I think is extremely unlikely, there’s nothing there but snow and ice if we managed to climb out. Remember?”

“That’s not even the hard part.” He grinned. “When we get to the top, they’re going to help us to get home.”

She frowned. "How exactly are they going to do that?"

"I'm still working on that." He turned away.

"I don't know if you're serious or not." Anne flopped back onto the ground, and then rolled her head to look at him. "But in this place, I've given up trying to work out what's believable and unbelievable anymore."

"So you like my plan and you're in?" he asked.

She sat up. "Sure. I'd pay money to see you try and convince a giant Viking woman whose heart you broke that she and her clan need to climb up inside a mountain, bringing her clan members with her, and then going out into subzero temperatures to somehow help us get home." She shrugged. "What's not to like?"

He got to his feet and held out his hand. "The grotto cave first. Let's see what Elle left us."

"Knowing her, nothing." Anne looked toward the dark mouth of Odin's Gate in the far cliff wall. She waved a hand in the air at it. "I put a Scottish curse on you, Elle Burgan, and all your descendants. I hope you come to a very unpleasant end."

"That ought to do it." Troy grinned.

Together they headed back along the cliff edge toward the path down to the grotto. Troy's mind worked, throwing up options for escape – every one of them more outlandish than the last.

CHAPTER 14

Office of the Norwegian Prime Minister, Regjeringskvartalet, Oslo

Detectives Bjorn Lomberg and Andrej Hansen sat talking quietly outside the prime minister's office. With them were scientists Eillen Hjardan and Eric Vanborg; both also talked animatedly, but softly, and held volumes of books, folders, documents, and numerous photographs.

The large double doors opened, and the undersecretary motioned them in. They stood, crossed to the door but he remained standing in front of them.

He looked at each of them. "Be brief and be clear. Time is valuable," he warned. "You have fifteen minutes." He stood aside.

Lomberg nodded and entered first, followed by his group. Inside the large room, several men and women sat around a long table, all on one side and there were four chairs set up on the other.

The undersecretary had followed them and motioned for them to sit down but didn't offer them a drink or anything other than another cautioning glance.

The four nodded to Annika Solberg, the Norwegian Prime Minister, and also two military men, plus another man in a dark suit they hadn't seen before.

Lomberg's first impression was that she looked tired. He bet he looked the same. He also had a suspicion the unnamed man was from one of the three-letter-agencies that no one talked about. Right now he was examining Lomberg as if he was a bug under a microscope.

Annika Solberg leaned forward, her forearms on the desk and fingers clasped. "Leka Island, Bronnoysund, Berg, Vik, and now Vennesund, all gone. The deaths, massacres, have been going on for days, and growing larger and more vicious. From one end of the coast to the other." Her eyes were red-rimmed and angry. "Why has this thing not been killed or even sighted? How can it move so quickly?"

"We think there might be more than one," Detective Lomberg replied.

Solberg closed her eyes and nodded. "*More than one*. How many more than one?"

"Maybe only two of them." Lomberg's lips pressed into a line for a moment. "They're big, fast, and learning as they move along the coast. They attack at night, taking entire villages. We understand one or both has been shot, even by heavy caliber weapons. But their size and strength, and scales like armor plating, means they remain unharmed."

Solberg turned to the men in uniform. "Why has the military not engaged yet?"

"We have," General Magnar replied. "The navy intercepted one of the creatures with a Skjold-class patrol boat. They engaged with their 76mm Otobreda Super Rapid multi-role cannon – it can cut through steel and has a firing velocity of..."

Solberg waved her hand. "Yes, yes, what happened?"

Magnar's eyes blazed for a moment as he stared at the prime minister. He continued, his voice now low. "They also deployed a Kongsberg Naval Strike Missile. And it struck. I can't tell you if the beast was injured, even lightly, as there is no final report, because they were then sunk, and all hands lost."

Solberg swore under her breath and turned back. "What exactly are we dealing with here?" she pointed a finger at Lomberg. "And don't say monsters."

The senior detective straightened in his chair, not sure what to call it. He turned to the scientists. "Doctor Hjardan."

She nodded. "An aberration. A throwback. Possibly a mutation," Hjardan replied. "It doesn't matter what we call it. You see, we have no complete evidence of a creature like this in the fossil record."

"So we get to fight something we have never heard of or seen before. Lucky us." Solberg sat back, but then her eyes flicked up. "No *complete* evidence?"

"That's right. Maybe it has been seen," Vanborg replied. "But only in our legends. The few descriptions we have received have indicated its form is reminiscent of, *ah*, a dragon." His eyes were dead level, with no hint of humor or sarcasm. "And it spits something like fire – a digestive enzyme that is about ten times more corrosive than hydrochloric acid."

Solberg sighed. "And these things have developed a taste for human flesh."

"Not just humans," Hjardan replied. "Seal colonies have vanished, local pods of whales and dolphins have all disappeared, plus entire herds of cattle are taken. They are decimating every living thing along the coastline."

"Someone give me some good news," Solberg demanded.

"We now know how to track it - them," Lomberg replied.

"Good. Now we're getting somewhere." The prime minister exhaled with exasperation. "Show me."

Vanborg slid a few high-altitude pictures across the table to the prime minister. They were little more than just fluorescent, grainy outlines of the beast and her brows came together as she studied them.

"Thermal images from the satellite. Not very clear, but they show us

that the creature is hot, very hot.” Vanborg slid another one across to her. “Computer engineering of the image to give us some improved definition.”

Solberg lifted it and stared; the image was of a large reptilian shape with a short muscular tail, four strong limbs, and large head, all covered in spikes and protrusions. Beside it there was a scale, that indicated the creature was approximately ninety feet long.

“My God, my God, my God,” Solberg whispered as she shook her head. “So big.” She looked up. “Where are they now?”

The two detectives and two scientists glanced at each other before Lomborg sat forward.

“They seem to have vanished,” Lomborg replied. “Yesterday.”

“What?” Solberg dropped the picture. “This thing here is as big as a brontosaurus. How can something that big vanish?”

“Actually, it’s bigger than a brontosaurus that only got to around sixty-six feet. But not as big as the Argentinosaurus, the biggest dinosaur to ever exist, that can grow to one-hundred-and-fifteen feet,” Vanborg added helpfully. “But I estimate that at its rate of growth, it will achieve that size within the next week, and exceed it in the week following that.”

“And just how big could it get?” Solberg asked softly.

After a moment’s silence, Eillen Hjardan lifted her head. “We don’t know that yet.”

The prime minister closed her eyes for a moment and groaned softly. “So, it could get much bigger.” She opened them. “Where?” she placed a hand on the picture. “Where did they vanish?”

“We think somewhere along the lower western coast, but we can’t be sure. One minute they were in the ocean, then they dived deep. And then...” Lomborg held his hands wide.

“Then they just held their breath, swam away, and came up somewhere else.” Solberg’s eyes slid to the military men. “I want gun placements all along the coast. I want mobile garrisons set up. I want flyovers. I want ships dropping depth charges. I want these things found, and I want them obliterated. Understand?”

“We’ll make it happen, Prime Minister,” General Magnar replied.

Solberg nodded. “I just thank God there is only two of them. This much damage and death, think what would happen if there were more of them; they’d overwhelm us.”

Twenty-four hours ago, one of the dragons came up out of the deeper waters and broke the surface. It paused to lift its head to inhale the breeze and caught the scent that was coming from the land. It immediately turned and headed straight into the shallows and waded up the beach, being drawn on by the irresistible odor. It headed

straight into the thick forest and barged through trees, pulverized rocks, and soon came to the huge cave that had been dug into a mountainside.

The scent was heavier now, and it was the scent of a female.

The male dragon headed inside.

CHAPTER 15

Island interior, Lemuria, somewhere beneath the ice of Greenland

It took Troy and Anne two days to reach the foot of the hills leading to the Viking village. Elle had left them very little, except for one item he regarded of having real value: the Ruhmkorff lamp.

They had made good progress and would have made it hours earlier, but a pack of raptors feeding on the carcass of some larger herbivore meant they had needed to skirt all the way around an entire area of the forest and move through denser foliage.

"We're close but haven't seen any of them yet," Anne said.

"I bet they know we're here and are watching us," Troy replied. He had taken out the medallion Yrsa had given him and hung it around his neck. He hoped it would buy him an audience with Skarde, the chieftain. And he also hoped Yrsa didn't carry a grudge, because if she had turned on him, so would the entire clan, and then he and Anne would be dead. Maybe even eaten.

They continued trekking up the hill, this time following the path. Troy tried to see everywhere at once as he was on the lookout for any ambush predators, and just as he felt they were closing in on the huge defensive wall the Vikings had built, a huge warrior stepped out, holding an axe in one hand that was as long as Troy.

He blocked the path, rested both hands on the axe handle, and glared with a ferocious expression.

"Shit," Anne whispered.

Troy thought he recognized him – the warrior who had given him the raptor claw when he went to fight the theropod. *Druuna*, he thought the huge man's name was.

"Hail, Druuna," Troy said and raised a hand.

The man cocked an eyebrow. "You missed us so soon, Troyson Strom?"

"Maybe I just missed you, Druuna." Troy walked forward and stopped before him.

Even after spending all the time with Yrsa who was close to eight feet tall, the men were gigantic. They stood over eight feet and were as broad as three axe handles across the shoulders. They were true giants, and perhaps where the legends first came from.

"It is good to see you." Troy held out his hand.

Vikings didn't shake hands, but they clasped the lower arm of a friend or ally in a greeting.

Druuna reached out to grip Troy's forearm, his huge hand wrapping

completely around it from the wrist to just below the elbow. Troy's hand did little more than grip the wrist with his fingers unable to meet. But for some reason the man didn't seem as big as he did once before – Perhaps I'm getting used to them, he thought.

"Is Skarde still chieftain?" Troy asked. "We came to speak with him."

"He is, for now," Druuna replied. "The transition ceremony is underway."

Troy knew that in some clans to rise to the status of chieftain, some aspirants needed to complete some tasks, or challenges.

"Yrsa?" Troy asked.

"Yes, she may be chieftain. If she survives," Druuna announced. "Come. The old chieftain will enjoy seeing you again. And many of the clan, as they still talk of your time in the arena." The big man grinned. "Birwulf's death was good sport."

Troy laughed. "Yes, and it is not something I'll forget soon either." He turned to Anne. "Here we go."

"Did I hear that right; Yrsa may become chieftain?" She blew air through her pressed lips. "I really hope she has forgiven you."

He nodded and turned away. *Me too*, he thought.

After Troy and Anne passed through the heavily fortified gate and entered the village, most of the clan came out to see them. Only a few looked distrustful, but most waved and smiled as they obviously recognized them. Troy had to remind himself that these people were cannibals, and he and Anne had nearly suffered that fate if it wasn't for his victory in the arena.

Druuna led them to the large dwelling on the highest point within the village and bade them wait as he entered. There was a brief discussion and Druuna soon returned.

"You may enter."

Troy and Anne thanked him and stepped forward, but Druuna put out a large hand. "Just son of Strom has earned the right to speak to the chieftain of the Fjall."

"What the hell?" Anne scowled.

She looked about to protest, louder, but Troy turned to her, taking her hand. "It's just a protocol thing; just give me a few minutes, this won't take long."

Anne folded her arms tightly and she glared at the giant beside her. His expression was unmoving, and she just huffed and scowled at Troy instead.

He held up a hand. "I'll be quick, promise." He turned and then entered the chieftain's hut.

Inside he found the chieftain seated on a carved wooden throne,

with a cloak of dark hairlike feathers around his withered shoulders. In the brief time Troy had been gone, Skarde looked to have aged considerably, and Troy wondered whether he had an illness that was eating away at him.

“Troyson Strom.” The chieftain sat forward and coughed a few times. “Your heart is strong, but your body still small.” He held up a finger and waggled it. “But do not underestimate the son of Strom, or he’ll take your head.” He laughed and sat back. “So, why do you return to us?” He eyed him. “And return covered in just rags?”

Troy looked down. Though life on the brutal mysterious island had burnished his muscles, his clothing was literally rotting off him. And what remained was overly tight and seemed to have shrunk. He bet he looked like a pathetic beggar.

“I am here because I seek your help,” Troy said. “The *jern fisk* was stolen from us...”

“By who?” Skarde asked.

“By one of my, *ah*, clan,” Troy admitted.

Skarde grunted. “The little people are not to be trusted.” He pointed at Troy’s chest. “But I trust you, Troyson Strom, because my daughter trusted you. But no others.”

“Your daughter.” Troy lifted his chin. “She returned to you. Is she here now?”

“She returned,” the chieftain replied. “But she is gone. Gone many days now.”

“What?” Troy was crestfallen. “Where did she go?”

Skarde held his arms wide. “I have fought all my battles, Troyson, and I am nearly spent. It is time for me to travel across the bridge to Asgard and sit with Odin in his great hall.” His old rheumy eyes fixed on Troy. “There are dangers coming. The Aegir clan has been raiding our hunting parties and wishes to make war on us. We need a strong war chieftain to defend the Fjall, not a tired, old man.”

Troy had heard the other clans mentioned before but thought there was some sort of truce in place – as long as they stayed in their own territories there was peace. Something had broken it. Maybe it was because the chieftain of this clan was old, and the seaside clan, the Aegir, saw an opportunity to expand their territory and influence.

Troy looked up at the old chieftain. “She went somewhere?” he asked.

Skarde nodded. “She wishes to be chieftain. But she must prove herself worthy first.”

Troy knew of these challenges for clan leadership. Sometimes, the wannabe leaders died undertaking them. It was the Viking’s answer to sorting the wheat from the chaff.

“Where is she? What is she to do?” he asked quickly.

His face was grim, and Troy could see worry lines creasing his forehead. "She must do as I did." He opened his cloak and grasped a black tusk-like thing that was tied around his neck. It was at least a foot in length, thin, backward curving, and wickedly sharp.

To Troy it looked too thin to be a talon, more like some sort of horrifying tooth or fang.

"She must enter the cave of the *Frigga*. She must face the largest of them and slay it." He tapped the fang. "And bring back its tooth as proof."

Troy exhaled, feeling his spirits sink. The word *Frigga* didn't make sense. He knew there was an ancient Norse goddess called Frigga, who was supposed to dwell in the wetlands, but he didn't know what type of animal it referred to.

He glanced again at the fang – it could have been reptilian, he thought, maybe a giant snake. Perhaps the test was she had to enter a snake pit, find, and then kill the biggest one in there, and tear out its fang. And by the look of the size of that tooth, it was a monster.

Troy looked up into the old man's eyes and saw sadness there.

"She has been gone a long time?" he asked.

Skarde nodded. "She should have been back by now." He hung his head and exhaled. "But some do not come back." He looked up. "It is forbidden for another Viking to offer her assistance." His eyes were dead level. "But you are not a Viking, Troyson Strom." He lifted his chin. "If she were here, and chieftain, then she would help you."

Troy nodded and straightened. "Just tell me where these caves are."

CHAPTER 16

Half a mile out, the west coast of Portugal

The massive, ancient cephalopod species hung in the water off Portugal. It was warm here, too warm, and it preferred slightly colder waters. Also, the time of the small creatures coming was too long in between feedings and it needed large prey to sustain it now.

It could sense the hint of the cooler waters coming from further up the coast and glided up along the shoreline. It would continue until it found a preferable spot. And plenty of larger creatures to feed off.

CHAPTER 17

Viking village, Lemuria, beneath the ice of Greenland

Troy emerged from the chieftain's hut and Druuna stood aside, nodding to him. Anne came straight up to him and grabbed his tattered shirt front.

"What happened? What did he say?"

"She's gone," he replied, his brows knitted. "Gone too long."

"Oh no. Do you think she's...?" Anne left it hanging.

"Maybe, maybe not." He looked up. "She embarked on the ancient clan ordeals to prove herself worthy of becoming a chieftain. But she never came back."

"I'm guessing they're dangerous," Anne sighed.

"Yeah, sounds like she needed to enter a cave that was home to some sort of deadly creature, a *Frigga*," he laughed darkly. "And return with one of its teeth."

"What the hell is a *Frigga*?" Anne asked.

"No idea, maybe a giant serpent." He pushed long black hair off his face and sighed. "Maybe something else entirely."

"*Jesus*," Anne replied.

Troy looked out to the dark forest around them. "I need to help her, so she can help us and talk the tribe into helping us. The chieftain said as much. I need to go and find her. See what happened."

"And what happens if we find her and see that something bad has happened? What happens to us then?" she asked.

He turned to her. "You'll be safe here. Skarde gave me his word." She began to protest but he held a hand up. "I'll be moving fast, and with this I don't know what to expect, so I can only watch out for myself."

She put her hands on her hips. "I didn't know I was such dead weight." She pointed. "The last time we were in a cave, we found some weird bugs that would have made a meal out of you if not for me. You need me," she warned.

"I do. But I must do this solo. Sorry." He turned to the huge form of Druuna. "We need new clothing. Do you have it?"

Druuna pulled on his beard for a moment, looking at their smaller bodies. "There is an old woman, Farhilde, who makes the best clothing in the village. She also makes them for the younglings." He began to nod. "She will have some clothing for you."

"We need them now," Troy replied. "And a sword. My size."

Druuna looked at Troy again, perhaps assessing his arm. He nodded and turned away. "Follow."

He took them firstly to an old hut that was draped with cloth, leather-like hides, and belts. There was even some hardened skins or carapaces that might have been armor.

Druuna went in and in just moments returned with a large woman, almost as wide as she was tall.

She looked them over and seemed pleased. "They are not so small. Good." She approached Troy and bent forward, bringing her face close to his. "I was at the arena that night." She felt his bicep. "You are strong and fast for someone of your stature." She straightened. "And I'm sure Birwulf found that out... after he lost his head," she guffawed.

"We need clothing. Urgently. I have a quest to undertake for the chieftain." Troy tried to hurry her.

Druuna departed to the armory and left him with Farhilde, the seamstress. Her face became serious after the mention of the clan leader and Troy's quest – Vikings took those seriously.

"Will you be doing battle?" she asked.

"Yes," Troy said. "And I'll need high mobility and I'll need to be able to move quickly."

She grunted and had Troy sit down. She pulled a flat stick from her pocket and lifted one of Troy's feet, tugging off his old boots that had holes showing through the soles and were now stuffed with leaves for protection. The sock had already long gone. She measured his foot and then did the same for Anne.

"Wait here." She went back inside her hut and came back out with some hides and clothing.

There were pants, tunics, and vests. Plus, a breast plate that was covered in rivets. Anne had refused a dress and demanded pants and vest as well. She was given one that was a brushed leather material, that was strong, but also had scales sewn onto it, for protection.

The clothes weren't a perfect fit, but they were miles better than what they had and gave them much better protection. The shoes were a type of soft boot with hard soles and rose calf length, plus straps to bind it to the legs.

Farhilde walked around them, nodding. "Now you look like real Vikings." She held a bone needle and some sort of thread that looked like cat gut but probably came from a small dinosaur and kept trying to make the clothing a better fit, but Troy refused.

"These are very good, Farhilde. You will be thanked by the chieftain." Troy rotated his shoulders and then knocked against his breast plate. It was solid, protective, but still allowed him good arm movement.

Druuna returned with a sword and scabbard, plus a pair of daggers. The sword was about three feet long, and double edged. It was razor

sharp, and even though it was supposed to be for a youth as a training weapon, it was still heavy.

Anne took both daggers, as Troy still had his hunting knife, plus his gun with a couple of lonely bullets.

Troy turned to Anne. "Skarde has given his word he will look after you until I return."

She huffed. "Yeah, you told me last time they were going to look after me by eating me." She folded her arms. "Just hurry back, because if anything happens to you..." She held out an arm toward the village. "This is not how or where I want to end my life."

Troy sheathed his sword. He leaned forward to kiss her cheek, but Anne grabbed him, pulled him to her and instead kissed his lips, hard for a moment, before pushing him back. "Go on, git. Before I change my mind and follow you anyway."

Troy grinned and bowed. He turned to Farhilde and Druuna. "Thank you. If Odin's luck is with me, I should return in three days."

Druuna grinned back, his strong teeth showing through his thick beard. "I have seen you fight, Troyson Strom. I think you'll be back."

Troy nodded and turned away. He remembered the chieftain's instructions and saw the huge banyan-like tree in the distance. It was the first landmark on his journey.

Without another word he set off.

Troy followed the directions set down by Skarde. Along the path through the forest of thorns, that made him glad he wore the toughened materials and armor, and even so, many gouged his leather-like plates, and he could only imagine the damage they would have done if he had on his previous tattered rags.

He then had to cross a narrow, but fast-moving river – he knew what lived even in the smallest rivers, and as it was overhung with huge branches it made the water dark to the point of being impenetrable when it came to seeing how deep it was, or what manner of thing lurked within it.

He tried to think how Yrsa would have done it – she hated water, so... he looked up. The branches of the trees stretched out from either bank, touching and intertwining at their center. She would have climbed and scaled across. So that's what he did as well.

He leapt up to the lower branches and swung his legs up. Then moved higher and higher until he was fifty feet up and on the level of the limbs that stretched out over the water.

He kept his eyes on the fast-moving stream, making sure there was nothing of size that might take a leap up and pick him from the branches like a ripe fruit.

As he edged out, he moved his hands along a branch just over his

head for balance. Then his hand came down on something shiny-smooth, that moved, and hissed like a truck braking hard. He jerked his hand back and looked up.

Troy wobbled without the overhead support but saw that he had disturbed a large centipede-like creature that had a fire engine red head, and pincers easily a foot across. He knew that many centipedes back home were venomous, and meat eaters, and given this thing's size, he bet the prey it probably went after were big and armored, and he had no doubt it carried a toxic punch that would either stun him or stop his heart.

"Fuck off!" he shouted.

The thing didn't budge an inch and instead advanced a little. There was no way it was going to let him pass, and he thought trying to duck underneath it might just give it an opportunity to drop down on his exposed neck.

That left one option.

"Your funeral," he said.

The huge centipede continued to advance, and he bet it was now deciding whether or not to try and make a meal of him. Troy gave up with bug diplomacy, and drew his sword, and in one slash, brought it down on the upper branch and right across the centipede's segmented area just behind the head.

The sharp blade cut cleanly with the head and pincers being flicked off and falling into the river to be swept away. The body clung on tight to the branch, probably not understanding why the signals from the brain stem were missing, so it just locked itself down and hung on.

Troy soon made it to where the branches intertwined, crossed to the next tree, and then scaled down to the opposite bank. In another fifteen minutes he came to the stone totem he was told to expect – it was an ancient image of Odin, half sunk in the dirt, and bearing his shield and war helmet. The face was twisted in battle fury, and it was supposed to mark an area of the forest where a great battle took place between warring factions of the Vikings, splitting them into separate clans forever.

Troy had seen the seaside Viking clan, and it made him wonder how many other groups there were. As if he didn't have enough problems, running into another band of furious giant Vikings would be the end of him.

He turned from the totem and as instructed by the chieftain headed down into a gorge. The forest quickly turned to jungle, thick, and damp. The light closed in, and even though it was still just only midday, the branches and foliage became so dense it turned the atmosphere to near nighttime.

Moisture dripped from huge fern fronds, and the ground became

squashy underfoot. Troy was told from here that he would need to travel for a thousand paces, which he estimated at a giant Viking pace being three feet would mean that he had a little more than half a mile to go. But it would be hard and slow, and he tried to not use his sword as a machete, as he was also told by then he had entered the kingdom of the *Frigga*, and he should now tread lightly. And grow eyes in the back of his head.

Troy had no idea what these things might be, but in a land of giant reptiles and monsters unlike anything he had even heard of, it was these that the Vikings had a lot of respect for. Or fear for. And that was why they were presented as the chieftain's challenge.

Skarde had told him that it usually only took a few days to complete the task. But Yrsa had been gone a week. Not a good sign.

He crept forward. The forest had gone deathly quiet, and he was told the final part of the clues to find the place of the *Frigga* was that he would know it by the smell.

He inhaled. There was an odd scent in the air, a little like cloyingly sweet almonds. Thankfully it didn't remind him of the *drekka* lair, so he was a little relieved.

Jutting from the jungle earth there were large, moss-covered boulders and it told him the bedrock was coming to the surface. Then to prove that, up ahead he saw the broken open hole in the ground. It was a good fifty feet across and looked slippery around the outside.

That's got to be it, he thought.

Troy crouched and observed the opening for a while. He gave it a good ten minutes, but nothing came or went, and there also didn't seem to be anything in the trees above.

"Nothing to fear but fear itself," he whispered.

Troy sucked in a deep breath and then got down on his belly and began to crawl to the edge of the hole. The weird smell got more powerful, and he was sure there was something like smoke or dust rising from inside.

He got to the edge and looked down – it was as dark inside as he feared, and he reached down along his body to turn the charging wheel on the *Ruhmkorff* lamp and waited a few seconds for it to reach its full glow.

"Here goes nothing," he breathed, and slid in.

The opening was smooth but unexpectedly sticky on his hands and he turned to lower himself down feet first. At the bottom he crouched and waited, listening.

After a few moments of hearing nothing, he held out the lamp and waved it around – he saw no footprints but along the walls there were multiple cave openings to choose from.

Eeeny, meeny – the biggest one – *mo*. He started in, staying close to

the wall and holding the lamp before him.

The place gave him the creeps, and as he still had no idea what a Frigga was, he could not be sure what and where he should look out for it. He kept his sword in its scabbard over his back and instead pulled his gun out into his free hand. He crept ahead.

It was in another few minutes he saw that the tunnels were becoming shrouded in silk. Then another few minutes more before he came across the first of the 'packages' – animal carcasses wound up into bundles.

Troy came close to one and held the lamp up – it was a horned animal that was around the size of a small pony. Or had been. Now it was shrunken down to scaled skin pulled tight over bones, and sunken eye sockets.

Troy looked briefly over his shoulder, feeling the hair rise on his neck. He continued on a little more and found another bundle of silken web. As he came closer it squirmed, and he used the muzzle of his gun to pull some of the webbing down. Inside was a theropod this time, and on its shoulder were two large fang marks.

It seemed drugged as its eyes were rolled back, but as yet it hadn't been devoured. He guessed it was still in the larder as a meal to come. He wondered whether it was caught outside or had ventured in here to track prey – big mistake – you'd have to be insane to come in here of your own volition, he thought and scoffed at his own madness.

I really hope you're in here, Yrsa, he mentally pleaded.

Troy paused at a junction of several more tunnels, each of these about eight feet around and lined with silk. Even under his feet there were large strands reaching off into the dark holes surrounding him and he wondered if they were to telegraph vibrations that there was an intruder, or perhaps their next meal.

And his next thought was: *to who, or what?*

He had no idea which way to go, and wondered how much time he could give it – hours more, days?

I have no idea, he thought. *But I won't give up on her easily.*

Time to take a chance. He sucked in a deep breath. "Yrsa," he yelled.

There was no echo and the sound seemed muffled, perhaps by all the webbing.

He turned to face another of the tunnels. "Yrsa."

Troy walked toward one of the tunnels and held the Ruhmkorff lamp inside it. He shone it around and then downward. There were no footprints or signs of anyone or anything passing through.

He went to the next tunnel, repeated his calls, and got the same result.

Troy turned slowly, holding the lamp up. His light started to turn a

dull orange and the darkness became like a beast that crept in all around him at once. He quickly reached down to turn the small handle revving it back up to a full charge and pushing the dark beast back again.

The one-hundred-and-fifty-year-old lamp flickered.

“Don’t you dare,” he begged it, and placed a hand on it for a moment.

There were about six tunnels at this junction, and if he couldn’t get an idea of which one to explore, he’d either have to check them all, or maybe backtrack and see if he missed some clue back at the entrance.

Troy moved along to the third tunnel. This one smelled weird and he leaned in.

He held the lamp up.

The sight that met his eyes made him scream in fright – there was a massive, black creature hunched inside the tunnel. It had a face like a dark furred gorilla except with eight shiny black eyes crowded all over it. Behind it was massive lumps of a muscular bulbous torso and long bristled legs.

He turned and ran, his feet cushioned on the web matting beneath him. He sprinted into one of the largest tunnels, holding the lamp before him and the gun which he held with finger now on the trigger.

Troy glanced back over his shoulder but behind him the light only extended a few feet, so he didn’t know if the thing was right there and just out of his small ball of light, or if it had given up on him. He heard nothing, but he sprinted on, blindly.

After many minutes his mind screamed: *stop*.

He knew he’d get lost if he kept up his panicked running. Also, his lamp was beginning to dull again and he needed to at least slow to focus on cranking the handle.

He looked back over his shoulder again, nothing there, and he decided to give himself a little extra burst of speed before he would stop. But just as he began his final sprint he ran face first into a web. And stuck.

Troy immediately fought against it, but it was huge, spun across the opening into the larger cavern like a fish net. And it caught him as surely as any fish. The web strands were strong, thin, and had hurt where he ran into their wire tight lengths. Also, the glue on them was the most adhesive thing he had ever encountered, and it stuck hard, so hard, that when he tried to pull his face or hand away, the skin felt like it was going to tear.

He stopped struggling, still breathing hard, and tried to calm himself. He looked inside the larger cavern where his weakening light showed that around the cave edges, at the ground level and some suspended up higher were multiple cocoon packages, dozens of them,

some small and shrunken, and others larger and fuller – it was the creature’s larder.

Troy had his head half turned and from the corner of his eye saw the huge shape loom from the tunnel – it had been following him the entire time, in no hurry, and perhaps herding him, right to this point. And he guessed he was expected to soon be added to the kitchen table.

It would bite him, sinking long fangs in, just like those that had hung around Skarde’s neck. It would inject him with a numbing poison, making him immobile, so it could feast on him when it wanted. And worst of all, it would feast on him while he was still alive.

He suddenly wished Anne was here.

“Fuck off,” he yelled as he felt the thing come even closer.

In Troy’s right hand was the revolver – he hadn’t dropped it, but the hand and gun were gummed tight to the web strands. Try as he might, he couldn’t pull his hand away, and the thing was coming in at him from his left side, and the gun was at the right.

At least the gun was lying flat and pointing in the right direction – that gave him an idea, a crazy one, but at least it was something.

The huge spider almost gently lay one foot on the web, and he bet its chelicerae, as Anne had told him once, were the fangs and their muscular bases, would be rising in preparation to stab into his soft flesh.

Troy strained to lever the gun muzzle back. It was literally pointed straight at his own head right now. He strained, sweat breaking out on his forehead and running down his back, but still couldn’t lift the gun hand or his fingers any more. The danger, as it was positioned now, was that he’d blow the back of his head off if he fired.

If he couldn’t move his hand, then he’d move his head – not back, but forward. He groaned as he pushed his face further in the web strands, and they were elastic enough to allow him a few more inches.

Something bristly brushed his cheek and he knew his time was up.

He fired.

He miscalculated. But by only a fraction, and his head was grazed. His hand was also blown backwards and ripped from the sticky threads, freeing it.

From behind him came a squeal and thumping which he hoped was the sound of the creature in pain. The squealing got softer and then was gone.

“Oh God, oh God...” he said, feeling nauseous, dizzy, and exhausted all at once. He knew it was the adrenaline leaving his system, and he lowered his arm.

Troy holstered the gun with its last bullet remaining and drew his

sword and used it to cut away the threads from around his head and body. After a few minutes he fell back out of the web, desperately wanting to rest, but instead he spun, holding up his sword.

The monster spider was gone, and on the ground were just splashes of black blood.

“Shit,” he said and put a hand to the back of his head and drew it back to look at it. There was blood and it stung like a bitch, but thankfully it was just a graze. And more importantly, he was alive.

“So, that’s what a Frigga is,” he groaned softly in the dim orange glow of the lantern, that was growing dimmer.

Troy lunged forward to grab it and crank the handle several times to bring it back to full glow. He stepped into the larger cocoon cavern and held up the light, and turned slowly – the wrapped cocoons were everywhere, big and small.

He stopped when he came to one of the packages that looked new, long at about eight feet, and undoubtedly human-shaped.

He stared, and then noticed at the top what could be white hair sticking out of it. White hair that had string and colored stones twined through. He charged toward it.

“*Please, please, please,*” he begged as he got to it and tried at first to use his hands to tear it open. But it refused as the threads were far too strong. He then used his knife and carefully inserted it and began to gently cut downwards.

It was like cutting thick canvas, and a few times the blade came out with a little blood on its tip.

“Sorry, sorry,” he whispered, but took it as a good sign, as it meant there was still blood flowing, and she hadn’t been drained or her heart stopped.

It was tough going so he started at the bottom and worked his way up, and after about fifteen minutes had opened a slit to her chest. He saw then that on one of her thighs there were two large and dark puncture wounds – obviously where the spider had bitten her and injected her with its venom.

He cut more, slowing when he got to her neck and then face.

“Yrsa,” he whispered and his heart thumped in his chest. She just looked to be in a troubled sleep as her brows were knitted together.

After another few minutes he was finally able to slide her out. He pressed a finger to her neck and felt a strong pulse.

“Thank God.”

She lay flat with her eyes rolled back and her hands curled into tight fists. He saw that she was dressed for battle and had her war paint on, plus a lot of armor. But the tunic dress she wore was strips of hanging leather and so allowed the spider’s fangs through.

He pushed the leather aside and placed his mouth over the bites and

sucked hard. He didn't know if it would work at drawing out any of the venom, but he didn't know what else to do.

He sucked as hard as he could and tasted blood, but also something tangy and sharp and he spat it out.

What else, what else? he wondered.

Then he saw that she also had a small bag at her waist, and he hurried to open it, hoping there was something specific inside. The first thing he found was his wristwatch that she had obviously brought for luck. Then he found a smaller bag and he hurriedly opened it – yes – there it was, the small container of ormarot root she had treated their burns with. He hoped its healing properties worked on venomous bites, and he opened it, dipped two fingers in, and then smeared the orange goo on and into the deep puncture wounds.

She groaned.

Good, he thought, pain is good, pain means you have still sensation in your legs. He saw she also had a small water bag at her waist, and he took it off and lifted it to her lips.

“Drink,” he said.

The water poured across her mouth, and some went in. It was only at the second attempt he saw her throat pulse as she swallowed some. He put a hand to her forehead, and she felt hot, but at least not burning up.

Troy heard a sound and snapped his head around to stare into the dark cave. There was nothing there, but he didn't know how badly he had hurt the big one or if there were more of the massive arachnids.

He really didn't want to hang around to find out but knew there was no way he was going to be able to carry a nearly eight-foot-tall Viking woman all the way along the tunnels, and then up and out.

He had no choice but to try and rouse her a little more so she could at least stagger with his help. Troy reached across to the Ruhmkorff lamp and spun the charging handle again. And then turned back to splash a little water on her forehead.

“It's okay,” he whispered. “I came for you. You're safe now.”

He stroked her cheek, and then he couldn't even understand why, but leaned forward to kiss her on the lips.

He sat back and smiled. “Prince Charming, I am *not*.”

He gave her some more water and this time she drank. Her eyes were still closed, but he saw they moved behind the lids, perhaps in some sort of feverish dream.

She groaned.

“I'm here,” he whispered. “I'm here.”

Troy looked down at her leg and saw the twin punctures looked less red. He snorted softly. “Magic potion.” He grinned. He turned back to her. “Remind me to take some of that back home.”

Troy turned to the tunnels trying to ensure nothing crept up on them while he was caring for Yrsa. They were as vulnerable as could be right now; he had one single bullet left, and he doubted his small sword would do much against the monster spider that must have weighed a thousand pounds, easy.

Troy wiped at his face where the left side was still strung with lines of the sticky web that refused to come off. He ignored them and turned back and looked down at the Viking woman and saw that her eyes were open.

“Yrsa?”

She sprang forward, grabbing him, and holding him tight. She burst into tears as she clung to him.

“Troyson. I thought I was dead and wandering in *Niflheim*.” She wiped one large arm across her eyes and nose and pulled back. “I wouldn’t ascend to Valhalla without you.” She pulled back to hold his face in her hands. “You came for me.”

“Of course,” he replied softly. “Always.”

She hugged him again and held him so tight that he thought he was going to choke, but then she released him, and looked at his face.

She spat at him, covering his left cheek.

“*What the...?*” He jerked back, shutting his eyes.

Yrsa quickly reached forward with her forearm and wiped his face. “The spit is the only thing that loosens the Frigga snares.”

“Oh, good.” He finished the job and felt the web slide away in her saliva.

Yrsa then seemed to come more fully awake and looked about.

“*The Frigga?*”

“Gone, for now. I wounded it,” he said. “But we must get out of here.”

“It bit me.” She looked down at her leg and saw the salve Troy had applied. “Good, good, you did well.” She looked about again. “We are in its nest. There will be more.”

“Then we need to get out of here, *now*,” he urged.

“No,” she responded. “I cannot go back without the Frigga tooth.”

She started to get to her feet but fell back down on her rump.

“Take it easy,” he said.

“Where is my axe and sword?” she asked. She looked about again. “It attacked me somewhere else. But then dragged me here. Oh no, I must have dropped them.”

She tried to get to her feet again, and this time managed to get upright. Troy came up with her, and she hung on to him, swaying, but determined to stand.

“Come on. We can come back later.” He hung the lamp around his neck and with her long arm over his shoulder he began to guide her

out.

Instead, she took his sword from the scabbard hanging on his back. The three-foot blade looked pitifully small in her hand.

"We can go," she said, looking at the blade as she swiped it in a loop in the air, "only when I have faced the Frigga. And killed it." She looked down at him. "Until then, I am not worthy to rule the Fjall clan."

Troy cursed under his breath. He knew she was dehydrated, still probably in some sort of toxic shock fugue from the venom pumped into her, and for all her great size and strength, undoubtedly weakened.

"Let's just get out of its feeding room first," he said and pulled her with him.

Yrsa staggered, using him as a crutch. She still had her left arm over his shoulder and held the blade in her right.

Troy paused to wind the crank handle on the charger for his lamp again, and its comforting glow intensified.

"Good," she said, looking down at the light. "It hunts in the dark." She looked up and down the web-lined tunnel. "That was how it caught me."

"You came with a light?" he asked.

"The Frigga is smart. And has hunted the Fjall clan people before. It learned that we need light to see, but it does not." She looked down at him. "So it put my light out."

"What? It was smart enough to do that?" Troy did not like the sound of that at all.

"It chased me, and when I fell, the first thing it did was to attack my torch to take away the flame. Once I was in the dark..." she shook her head, "I could not see it to fight it."

"*Shit*," Troy whispered. He couldn't imagine how terrifying it must have been to know that there was a giant carnivorous, eight-legged monster right next to you, and you couldn't see it. It would have freaked him out.

She squeezed his shoulder. "It will try and do that again."

He nodded. "It learns."

"Yes." This time it was her that pulled him forward.

Yrsa walked with a limp, and looking down Troy was relieved to see the puncture wounds were no longer surrounded by angry red signs of infection. They were now just dime-sized red wounds.

Troy tried to remember how far he had come and how much further he needed to go. There was a slight breeze in his face, and because he hadn't taken too many twists and turns, he felt he hadn't got lost.

"This way," he said, guiding her. "There's a junction coming up of

intersecting tunnels. Then I think straight ahead to the opening.”

In just a few more minutes they came out into the last junction, and helpfully, Troy saw his own footsteps in the web on the cave floor. In here the ceiling was higher so Yrsa was able to stand upright.

She drew in a deep breath, and he felt her muscles tense. Her brows had drawn together. “It comes.”

Troy turned, and also felt it. The breeze had stopped, meaning that the tunnel ahead had suddenly become blocked.

“Okay,” he whispered, and drew his gun.

“Stay in the open,” she said softly. “Keep your light shining ahead.”

Yrsa crab walked to the side, crouching slightly, and getting into a balanced battle stance. Troy went the other way, and backed toward the wall, ensuring that there were no open tunnels behind him, but doing as she asked.

Troy kept his eyes on the tunnel to the surface, expecting to see the massive spider gradually loom from within.

Instead, it burst forth, not at the larger target of Yrsa, but straight at him.

No, not at him, at his light.

Troy had fast reflexes from his years as a front-line agent in the CIA, and many times had to leap to dodge everything from punches to runaway cars to bullets. But this thing came at him like a dark, bristling freight train, and was all furious movement, legs, and fangs.

He leapt. But not quick enough. Too late he found out that the tip of a spider’s legs actually have hooks on them, and one shot out to jag Troy’s trousers, and bring him down hard onto the ground. In a half second more it was looming over him.

Other legs came down on him, pinning his gun arm – did it learn that the gun was dangerous? Probably, because as he stared up at it, he saw one of the two larger central eyes had been shattered – he bet his bullet had done that.

From somewhere that seemed a long way away he heard Yrsa scream.

Right on top of him the muscular chelicerae lifted and the two pulpy roots that held the foot-long tusk-like fangs were thrust forward. They came down, but into the lamp and there was a pop of breaking glass, and the lights went out.

Troy knew the fight was done with the huge thing on top of him holding him down and now in its preferred environment – the darkness.

He heard grunts, the sound of heavy blows and something splashed his face and neck. There also came inhuman squeals and rumbling and thumps for several seconds.

The huge weight moved off him. Then came silence. Troy stayed

still in the darkness, his eyes wide and staring at nothing.

In seconds more he heard movement, and turned his head toward it, but he could have held a finger an inch in front of his face and not seen it, so he tried to work out what it was based on his hearing alone.

There was a chipping and scratching. Then came a spark. More chipping, another spark, and then a small flame.

In that tiny fingernail-sized flame he saw Yrsa working a flint on a small, cupped piece of stone with something like hair or fur in it. She added something else, and the flame grew higher – and so did the illumination.

He saw her lift the small lamp she had created, and he saw the corpse of the spider with its head separated from its body.

She turned to him and smiled. “I told you the Frigga would go for the light.”

“And I had the light,” he laughed softly. “Are you telling me I was bait?”

She crossed to the spider’s head, put her flame down and knelt beside it. She grabbed the furred head by one of its tusk-like fangs, and used his sword to hack and saw at the base of the chelicerae until it came free.

Yrsa held it up, letting the black blood run down her fist. She nodded to it. “Now, I am chieftain.” She turned. “And now, we can leave.”

She tucked the fang into her belt and carefully lifted the light. She still held his sword and held out a hand to easily pull him to his feet.

Troy saw she still had a limp, but thankfully, even in her weakened state, the spider was no match for her when she was ready for it. Perhaps its one eye had slowed it a fraction, or it made the mistake of going for him over her first. But he was glad their odyssey was over.

She looked down at him, her eyes blazing from behind her black warpaint. “That’s twice you have saved me, Troyson.” She smiled. “You can’t help it. Even though you will not say it, you are bound to me.” She reached out to tap his chest. “In here, it whispers it.” She tilted her head as though listening. “But I can hear it.”

“And you have saved me more times than I can count.” He looked down at the smashed bulb of the Ruhmkorff lamp. He’d see if Anne could do something with it.

“Let’s go,” he said and turned to the tunnel he knew led to the surface.

What a day, he thought and exhaled with a whoosh.

Troy suddenly heard Yrsa yell his name, and he realized he had done the most rookie thing in a hostile environment – just when you thought you were done, you forgot to watch for hidden ambushes.

The impact and sudden pain in his calf made him look down at the

thing clamped onto him. There was a small version of the huge spider latched onto his leg, and both finger length long fangs were dug into his flesh.

His jaws began to lock together, and he felt fire first, and then coolness seeping up to his groin.

Just before the blackness took him, he saw Yrsa raise her sword, her teeth bared in a ferocious snarl.

Yrsa climbed from the pit and paused at the top with her head just at ground level. She let her eyes run over the surroundings. When she was satisfied it was clear she climbed out.

Troy was over one shoulder, and this allowed her free hands to climb, while also managing to hold her sword – not an easy task, but with the spider venom wearing off, she felt her strength returning quickly.

She was hungry and thirsty, but with the Frigga fang slung around her neck she felt rejuvenated and powerful.

She climbed out and stuck the sword in her belt, and then pulled Troy from her shoulder and into her arms. He was heavy now, but she carried him there and looked down to see the calf smeared with more of the orange salve and wrapped in a compression bandage of spider silk.

He would recover as it was a tiny Frigga. If it was a big one then the amount of venom would have killed him.

She looked down at his face and shifted him slightly so she could brush the now long hair from his forehead.

She smiled.

He had come for her. He had entered the Frigga nest and fought it away so he could free her. Only someone that loved you would do that, she knew.

There was an old saying her mother said to her once. It was about the *fiðrildi*, which Troyson had called a butterfly.

She remembered it now: *'If you love something set it free. If it comes back, it is yours. If it does not, it never was.'*

She smiled down at him again.

She had set Troyson free.

And Troyson came back.

EPISODE 20

Sometimes freedom is just a beautiful mirage

CHAPTER 18

Aboard the Nautilus, the North Sea, approaching the east coast of Norway

Elle was cold.

She had managed to navigate the Nautilus through Odin's Gate, between the mighty ice rift walls, and then out into the freezing sea beyond.

And that was where the water got cold. Real cold. It was coming to the end of summer now, and the bone chilling water around the coast of Greenland was at thirty degrees Fahrenheit, or minus one Celsius, and it radiated through the iron hull of the Nautilus. Plus the old vessel had no heating or none she could find.

She had pulled the blue jacket from Nemo's corpse and wore the dusty thing around her shoulders. She cared not for him, or his spirit, only that he had provided her with a means to escape, and to great wealth.

She had also found the hidden bottle of brandy and had sipped its peaty flavored, and still fiery, mix straight from the bottle.

She had little more than line of sight navigation, and only had enough water and dried meat to last a few days. At least the red gems would power her indefinitely, and she had spares as well. Lots of spares.

"Half a billion," she said and then laughed out loud. And that might be a conservative estimate for the value of all the gems she had in the engine room.

She looked down at the console. There weren't too many dials, levers, or buttons, for navigation, speed, tilt, depth, or even warnings. You basically had to just keep your eyes open.

She would follow a direct path for now. She had located an ancient compass, and she hoped it would start working as soon as they were a little further away from the island. If everything went to plan, she should make it to somewhere along Norway's west coast by the next day.

She thought briefly about Troy Strom. The man was good looking, brave, fun, and so trusting to the point of being a boy scout. But he was a survivor, and she felt confident he would manage, somehow.

Other than Troy, Anne, and herself, no one else knew about the hidden mysterious island. So maybe in a few years she might head back there to see how they're getting on, and maybe collect a few more rubies. With appropriate security, of course. After all, she'd be able to afford it.

She laughed again, took another sip of the one-hundred-and-fifty-year-old brandy, and got to her feet.

Elle wandered down along the metal corridor, allowing the Nautilus to continue to glide ahead by itself through the freezing water.

She entered the power room and headed straight to the hidden storage room. She opened it and looked inside, squinting from the blood-red glow. She let her eyes move lovingly over the massive oval rubies stacked on the shelves in amongst their beds of silvery soil. But how many exactly?

She began to bring them out and place them on a bench. As she did she brushed off the revolting dirt with metallic threads through it. Anne had said that dirt was the cause of the weird radiation. If that was true, then step one was to get rid of it.

She wiped them down with her sleeve, allowing her to appreciate their brilliant shine and luster.

After a few minutes she had eleven counted out. She estimated at \$100 million each, plus the ones in the power chamber, she had a billion dollars of wealth right in front of her. Even more than she had first thought.

She smiled dreamily as she stared at them, with the red glow reflected in her eyes. She blinked a few times as she felt the glass one growing warm in its socket.

Elle knew a little about financial markets, and one thing you didn't do was flood a market – it depresses the price. Better to leak the gems slowly, maybe one every year or so. After all, a 100 million dollars a year should be enough pocket money to get by on.

She sighed dreamily and headed out through the open door – life was about to get really interesting, she thought.

It was nighttime as the massive cephalopod settled on the bottom close to a seal colony. It could sense their fat, warm bodies on the rocks as it spread its eight arms wide, stretching out over seventy feet now.

The water was vastly colder here, but its unusual three-heart-powered metabolism, long striated muscles, and neutral buoyancy meant it wasn't bothered by cold, darkness, or even crushing pressure. In fact, it preferred cooler water.

Its pair of truck wheel-sized eyes saw clearly in the gloomy water, and its skin was sensitive to vibrations – and right now, there was a strange hum in the water. It was coming from further out in the dark ocean.

Sound meant food, and right now the sound was coming toward it.

CHAPTER 19

Viking village, Lemuria, beneath the ice of Greenland

Troy groaned long and low, and then sat up slowly. He put a hand to his head.

“Easy, easy.” Anne got up from her chair and rushed to him.

“What. The Hell. Happened?” Troy pulled the cloth-like hide from himself and saw the bandage on his lower leg. It looked swollen, but he was able to wiggle his toes so felt immediate relief.

“I went to get Yrsa. The spider.” He frowned as he stared down at his leg. “Bastard bit me.”

“She saved you. Brought you back. And managed to get her spider fang as well,” Anne scoffed. “And by the size of it, it was huge.” Anne felt his forehead. “You’re lucky she was there.”

Troy nodded, remembering it slightly differently. “Is she alright?” He looked around. “Where is she?”

Anne folded her arms. “She’s fine. Carried you all the way back. And she’s probably preparing for her grand inauguration ceremony right now.” She gave him a lopsided grin. “She’s about to be crowned queen.”

“Chieftain,” he corrected. “Good. That’s good.” He swung his legs over the side of the bed.

Anne went to hold him back, but he grabbed her hand and kept coming. “I need to put some weight on it. Get some circulation going,” he said and placed the bad leg on the ground.

“Oof.” He winced, feeling the pain shoot all the way up to his groin.

The large wooden door opened, and Druuna appeared. He grinned through his thick beard, as he seemed excited.

“Soon, this night, Yrsa becomes our chieftain. You are commanded to be there.” His grin widened and he leaned forward. “There will be a feast. And they are making Björr. A *lot* of Björr.” He half turned. “I will come for you.”

Anne turned to him. “Björr?”

“Beer,” Troy scoffed. “They’re brewing extra beer. Probably strong enough to strip paint.” He stood up. “I need a wash and my clothing.” He grinned lopsidedly at her. “We’ve got a party to attend.”

In about an hour, Druuna reappeared and led them both back to the arena that Troy knew well. But this time he and Anne were taken in a different entrance. They were led toward the chieftain’s area, and when they scaled up the huge steps and entered, they saw that the main chair was still empty. So were the ones next to it.

On the way there, several of the huge warriors nodded to him or said his name. Obviously his win of Birwulf was still remembered within the clan.

Finally, they were given a place to sit a few chairs away from the chieftain spot, and all around the arena the other seats filled quickly.

On the arena floor there were several fires burning, plus huge, bubbling vats of an orange-brown liquid with hot coals underneath and Troy bet that was the beer being stewed like a combination of rapid fermentation and a heady broth.

There were also various cuts of meat turning slowly on spits and long tables with platters of different fruits, vegetables, and even loaves of dark bread.

He inhaled. "Everything sure smells good."

"Yeah, I could eat," Anne replied and turned to look over her shoulder. "Where's queen of the jungle?"

Troy chuckled. "I suggest you be polite to her now she's about to become the boss. Or the next piece of meat turning on one of those spits might be you."

"Nice thought, thanks," she replied acidly.

The crowd was good humored, and many craned around and over each other to look at Troy and then whisper amongst themselves, and then look up toward the throne as they waited for the star of the evening to arrive.

In another few moments the crowd quietened, and the old chieftain, Skarde, appeared. A cheer went up and he nodded to them and held out an arm.

He held something in both hands and the crowd quietened.

"It is the time of testing. Who is worthy?" he said, and then paused obviously for dramatic effect. "But is there one honorable enough, strong enough, and brave enough, to enter the lair of the Frigga, kill it, and bring back its fang as proof?"

Troy smiled at the theatre of the performance.

"There is one," Yrsa said strongly, and then stepped out.

Troy felt a tingle run through him as he was taken aback by her magnificence.

She was in a beaten metallic looking breastplate that might have been gold. Her hair was not braided, but the long white strands hung down her back and in front of her broad shoulders. Her arms displayed the green tattoos, and her dress-like tunic was of belts that each had golden rivets inserted into them.

In her hand she had the fang and she lifted it high.

"I slayed the mighty Frigga. I am worthy."

The crowd's roar was deafening, and they pounded their feet, making the vibrations run through the entire structure. Troy just

hoped it wouldn't collapse and bury them under several tons of wood and giant Vikings.

She stepped up to the old chieftain and Skarde turned to the crowd. "Do any here believe they are more worthy?"

There was silence. Troy held his breath.

"Do any here challenge?" he waited.

Again, there was silence.

Troy looked around not seeing any sinister glances, and relieved that he had taken Birwulf out of the running.

Skarde then held up what he had in both hands – it was a type of crown that had the tusk-like teeth of some carnivore all around the band and pointing upwards, plus two larger ones curving down undoubtedly to go beside the face and under the jawline. There were silver bands holding it together and a large emerald at the center. He reached up to place it on her head.

He grabbed her hand, his face brimming with pride, and Yrsa's expression was one of determination and perhaps satisfaction.

Skarde raised Yrsa's hand high. "The new chieftain of Clan Fjall," he roared.

The crowd went mad again, and Troy noticed many of the young men looking at Yrsa now with a new admiration. She would have no problems finding a suitor, he thought.

When he looked back to her, she wasn't looking at any of them. She was looking at him, her expression unreadable.

He smiled and nodded almost imperceptibly to her. Only then did her lips curve a fraction. But then the crowd closed in front of him, and she had been led to her throne and sat down.

Troy and Anne settled in to watch the entertainment, which started with an axe throwing competition, which Druuna had entered and came a close second. Then arm wrestling. And also a weird competitive game where huge men punched each other in the stomach until the loser either threw up, or doubled over in agony.

Finally, as the evening matured, there came men and women playing pipes of various sizes and what might have been lutes that were basically an open box with tight strings within it.

The sound was barely melodious, but everyone seemed to be having fun, and soon, the meats were cooked, and the crowd was invited down to grab bowls of roasted meat and vegetables, and also huge jugs of beer.

Troy and Anne went down and tried a bit of everything. Troy was feeling pretty good, and he noticed that even Anne seemed to be having a good time. But after a few of the almost bucket-sized beers, she blew air between her lips and shook her head.

"Wow, glad I'm not driving tonight," she puffed. "This stuff has a

kick.”

“Yeah, it does, and probably more rocket fuel than the beer we’re used to. Take it easy,” he warned.

“Too late.” She laughed too loud and then sipped again. “I haven’t had anything to drink in two years, so this is savage.” She put her mug down, almost missing the bench top. “I think...” she blinked a few times. “I think I need to sit down before I fall down.”

“I think you need to lie down,” he said and took her arm.

A large woman appeared and held out a small flap of hide to Troy. He took it, opened it, and read the runes.

The woman then tilted her head toward Anne. “Does she need assistance, Troyson Strom?”

Troy nodded. “Can you see she gets back to her hut? She’s not feeling well.”

“Just one more.” Anne lifted her mug and staggered a few steps toward the beer vat.

But the huge woman reached out and grabbed her and with an arm around her shoulders led Anne away. Troy looked down at the note again, and then up to where Yrsa’s throne was. She wasn’t there anymore.

He scoffed at the words and their inference. “Don’t let it go to your head, girl,” he said and reread the old Viking symbols – he had been commanded to meet with Yrsa in the chieftain’s hut – *her* hut, and *now*.

He looked up as Anne was led out of the arena, and the Viking woman leading her was looking back at him with a cryptic smile. He recognized her; it was one of Yrsa’s friends. This had been planned, and he wondered if somehow her beer had been drugged.

It didn’t matter. This was a good time to ask for Yrsa’s help in scaling the mountain. Their getting home all depended on her now, and he needed the clan’s help.

Troy left the arena and headed up the path to the largest hut on the hill. A warm orange glow came from inside.

Troy knocked, but there was no answer. Probably because no one knocked here, they just shoved doors open and announced themselves. So he pushed the door inwards and went in.

Inside it smelled of warm furs or feathers, and of beer and berries. A fire burned in one corner and standing in the middle of the room was Yrsa.

She stood tall and proud with her hands on her flaring hips and the toothed crown still on her head.

“It suits you,” he said. “You were born to rule.”

She smiled. “If not for you, this would not have come to pass.

Instead, I would probably be being sucked dry by the Frigga.”

She crossed to a side bench with two small cups on it and a jug. She poured a little liquid into each of them, and then from a small pouch took a pinch of powder and sprinkled it into each. Steam rose from the warm, heady brew.

She picked them both up and walked toward him. She held one out, and he took it. He sniffed its aroma and found it like a mix of beer, meat, and something else sweet. But it also smelled earthy and potent.

“Whoa,” he said.

“Drink.” She held hers up and sipped.

He did and felt it run down his throat to explode in warmth in his belly. He looked up. “What is it?”

She smiled over the top of her mug. “The special drink of the chieftain.” Her eyes seemed luminous. “And her mate.”

Troy felt a tingling from his scalp to the tips of his toes. And then from his belly to his groin.

Yrsa sipped again, her eyes staring over the top of her cup at him. As he watched her, he saw her pupils grow large, and she placed the cup down on a bench and removed her breast plate; underneath she wore a tunic and she lifted it over her head,

She stood there, legs slightly apart, the green sworls, runes, and images of her tattoos seemed to come alive on her body. She ran both hands up her perspiration-coated stomach, lifting her breasts, and letting them drop so they bounced and then jutted proudly. A small smile was still on her lips.

She then reached down to the side of her leather dress that was leather-like straps hanging down to just above her knees and undid the knots holding it in place. She let it drop and stood there in her magnificence, the sweat on her body making her look like a glistening statue of female strength and beauty.

Troy felt his heart beating madly in his chest. He put his cup down and noticed his hand was shaking as his entire body seemed to vibrate.

“I know you like what you see, Troyson Strom.” Her voice had a smile in it, as she looked down his body.

She stepped toward him and placed both hands on each side of his face. “You came back for me. You fight for me. And I know you love me.” She bent to kiss him on the lips, and he reached for her.

She pulled her face back an inch as she talked directly into his face now. “There is only a small piece left inside you that wants to leave. The rest of you wants to stay with me.”

She reached down and stripped him of his clothing in seconds, and then pushed him back toward her bed.

Troy saw she still wore the crown, and this time she was on top.

What seemed like hours later, and when he thought he had no fluid left in his body, he lay on the soft fur-like hides as she hummed a soft tune beside him and ran a hand up and down his chest.

He really couldn't understand what he was doing, even while he was doing it. He knew he couldn't stay and every time he was with her, he must have been giving her the strong signals that he was going to remain here. In fact, he seemed to remember she even used the term 'mate' in relation to him.

"You know I need to leave," he said softly.

Her hand on his chest stopped moving.

"I need to go to my home. And I need your help to get there." He turned his face to hers. "You know this is not my world. It's yours."

"Why?" she said and moved her face a little closer. "Why do you need to go home? Everything you need is here." Her brows drew together. "What is back there that is not here?"

He smiled. "Different things. My life is there."

"Not anymore," she replied forcefully. "That woman you are with? You do not care for her like you do for me." She reached out a hand to touch his eyelids. "I see it here." And then his chest. "And in here."

He didn't know what to say so placed an arm behind his head and faced the roof.

Her eyes then narrowed as she rose up on one arm. "I could make you stay."

He turned to stare at her for a moment, having visions of that author in the Stephen King novel being hobbled by a crazed fan with a sledgehammer.

"You wouldn't like me like that," he replied softly.

She lay back down without responding.

"There are many fine warriors here. All of them would be honored for you to choose them," he pressed.

She thumped a fist down on the bed. "I do not want them. As chieftain, I choose my mate, they do not choose me."

"We are different," he began.

"Are we?" she replied. "Maybe not for much longer." She rose from the bed, and still naked, walked to the doorway in a few determined strides. On the way, she picked up a dagger, and at the door frame looked for a moment, judging, and at a place just between her elbow and shoulder, made a notch on the wooden frame post beside her.

She turned and pointed the dagger at him and then the notch. "When we pulled you from the hole on the ground those years ago, you were this tall."

He sat up slowly.

She turned back and with a thump, jammed the blade to stick in the

door frame, this time nearly a foot higher. She turned back. "Now you are this tall."

She stared at him for a moment and then smiled as she saw the look on his face. She reached up and dragged the dagger out and walked back toward him, slamming the blade down on the bench top as she passed, spearing it there, and looking back at him with raised eyebrows. "I told you, Troyson Strom, our world makes everything bigger, stronger. And you have now been here long enough that you too are drawing its power."

"That's impossible." He looked at his hands and then back to the door frame notches she had made.

It must be a mistake, he thought. But how could he tell if he was growing or not? If Anne was also getting bigger, he had nothing to judge it against. But he had thought before that Yrsa didn't seem the giantess he remembered from before. She was still much taller than him, but his own physicality didn't seem so overwhelmed even in their love making as it had been the first time.

He didn't feel any different and wondered if it was the effects of the iridium in the soil, the warm glow of the rubies, or something else entirely that came down with the meteorite all those millions of years ago.

A mutation, he bet Anne would have called it. At least it wasn't a horrible one.

"See, I can tell you know it's true." She lay back down and turned side on to him. "So, your world will not be big enough for you. And you will be better suited for my home. *Our* home."

Troy did a quick calculation and though he had been around six-foot-two when he arrived, adding eight to ten inches put him between six-ten and seven feet. For now, he could live with that, but any more and he'd start to become an anomaly when he got back home.

"The island is making you better able to live here." She smiled. "It is making you a true clan member."

"No." He shook his head. "No, I need to leave, soon." He stood and looked down. His leg where the spider bite wound was had healed and left little more than two red welts where the fangs had pierced him. He took a few steps – no more pain at all.

He heard Yrsa slide towards his side of the bed and also stood behind him. She reached out to grab his long dark hair and gently tug it back toward her.

He turned.

"Troyson, am I so horrible that you need to run from me?" Her smile told him, she knew exactly what effect she had on him.

"You are a beautiful dream I'm having." He smiled in return. "But at some point I need to wake up."

"I think you'll always have the dream. And if you go home, it'll turn into a nightmare that will haunt you." She stood. "And maybe force you to return. And that is why I will help you because I know you will only be gone for a short time," Yrsa sighed. "What do you need?"

Troy told her, and her mouth dropped open as she listened.

A short time later, Troy headed back to the hut set aside for himself and Anne. It was still early, and there was food set out for them.

Anne sat on the edge of her bed, holding her head with one eye closed, and the other, bloodshot as all hell, looking up at him.

"I feel like I got kicked by a mule, or a dinosaur, or a dinosaur-mule." She winced. "When did you get up?"

She obviously had been passed out the entire night and didn't even know he hadn't been in the hut with her.

"Been up for a while. Trying to gather support for our escape," he replied.

"And?" She looked up.

"And, we might get it. Begrudgingly." He half smiled.

"That's something, I guess." She groaned and stood to cross to the food. "I'm famished. I'm going to eat even though my stomach feels like I still may puke."

"You need extra calories. After all, you're a growing girl." He looked at her.

She frowned. "What's that supposed to mean?" She glanced down at herself. "A few extra scars, sure, but I'm in great shape."

"Stand up, and I'll show you," he requested.

She did, grimacing as she stood straight. "What's going on?"

He looked at her but couldn't see any changes. But because she looked the same, and not smaller than before, she was obviously keeping pace with him.

"Now look at me." He held his arms wide.

"Okay. You just look like a muscular hippy dressed in Viking cosplay," she chuckled. "What am I supposed to see?"

"You see it, but you don't see it." He walked toward the door frame. "Just like I didn't see it." He turned back to her. "Cast your mind back to when we first came here."

She nodded. "Okay."

"When we were pushed into one of these huts as prisoners, the doorway was enormous, or seemed enormous, and was probably eight and a half feet high. About two feet over my head." He turned and glanced at it. "Now look."

She did. And then began to frown. "Is this..." she walked toward him. "Is this a different size of dwelling?"

"No," he replied. "They're all the same sized doors, ceiling,

windows, everything.”

“Oh shit.” She turned away. “No wonder I’m hungry all the time. I need extra calories, because...” She turned back. “How? No, don’t answer that. It’s got to be the iridium, or the rubies, or something else on this island.”

“That’s what I think. A mutation,” he exhaled. “For the island it’s a necessary requirement for survival – rapid adaption to a hostile environment.”

“Yes, a mutation. But a rushed one.” She looked up at him, and then at the doorframe. “So that must make me... I mean, I was, five-seven, so now about six-four or maybe even six-five.” She grinned. “Cool. I always wanted to be taller.”

He half smiled. “Fine, but if we’re going home, we need to do it soon. I’d prefer not to go home being eight feet tall.”

“I’m ready when you are.” Anne was still looking at her hands, turning them over as if she was expecting to see the fingers grow right before her eyes. After another moment she dropped them and went to the food piled on the table.

“Starving.” She grabbed a wooden plate and started to pile meats and fruit on it. “This is a far better spread than the first time we were here.” She turned. “We must have gone up in the ranks.”

Troy knew exactly why.

“So...” She turned, chewing on something that looked like a strip of chicken. “What’s first?”

“First, we need to collect hides, hundreds of feet of them – either several large animals or dozens of small ones.” He began to list things off on his fingers as he paced. “Then, we need to strip them, and continue to work them until they’re thin and light. But still strong.”

Next finger, and he continued to count as he thought through the tasks required. “Then, we need to sew and glue them together. Then we need to weave a basket, preferably one that might have a degree of buoyancy and will float.”

She stopped chewing. “So, we’re going to make some sort of skin canoe?” she scoffed. “Troy, we’d never make it over the miles of snow and ice to even get it to float it on the water. And then even with a sail we’d...”

“No, not float on water.” He turned to her. “We’re going to make a balloon and fly out of here.”

She guffawed. “Whoa, what? That’s wild.”

“You bet it is.” He nodded. “But the original party used one to get here, even if it was by accident.” He shrugged. “The way I figure it is that as long as there isn’t a hurricane blowing when we get topside, we can launch it. We won’t need to travel via a slow boat, we can float to somewhere on eastern Norway, over the top of the frozen

ocean, and if luck is with us, be home in a day or two.”

She nodded. “Anywhere but here is fine with me.”

“So that’s my plan.” He folded his arms. “What do you think?”

“I think you’re mad.” She grinned through a mouth full of food. “And I also think I’m mad because I’m all in.”

She ate more, and obviously thought a bit more about his plan. She stopped eating and turned. “That’s going to be a heavy kit to drag up the inside of the Mother of the Sky. Then if, or when, we get there, we’ll need to inflate it.” She lifted one eyebrow. “The clan is okay with all of this? After all, it’s going to be them that has to do the heavy lifting.”

“Yrsa said they will help,” he replied.

Anne scoffed. “I’m just surprised.” She looked up at him. “I mean, I’m surprised she is going to let you go. I’m pretty sure she has a thing for you.”

He shook his head. “She’s chieftain now. And leading the clan is a full-time job. She’ll help, but it will be the last time.” Troy turned away, feeling a little flat again, but sucked in a deep breath and turned back. “Anyway, you’re the head of our science department, so help me make plans for constructing a balloon, inflating it, and then sailing it home.”

She groaned. “I’ve studied the Montgolfier brothers’ design back in my university days. They launched the first balloon with people riding in it back in 1783. And as for size, we’ll need a balloon fifty feet high, at least.”

He frowned. “That big? For just the two of us?”

“That’s the problem; it’s not just the two of us. It’s the *total* weight.” She hiked her shoulders. “The skins will be heavy, the basket will be heavy, and we’ll be heavy. I mean, look at you; you look like you weigh about two-hundred-and-seventy pounds now at least.”

He nodded. “More to carry, but still doable.”

“Maybe. There’s something else.”

“Like what?” He sat down.

“Modern balloons have lightweight skins for the actual balloon canopy, but they’re strong as well as light, but they’re also deigned to be filled with buoyant gases. We’ll be going old school and using heated-up air... from a fire.”

“Oh yeah, of course.” He closed his eyes. “We’ll need wood for the fire.”

She nodded. “That we’ll need to burn, and burn, and burn, for the entire voyage or we’ll end up in the cold water.”

“So, the fuel we’ll need to burn will also be heavy.” He sighed and leaned his head back on his neck with eyes closed.

“But...” she said.

He opened his eyes.

“If we get a good breeze at our backs, then the trip might be over quickly. Maybe in less than a day.” She smiled. “And that means it could all be doable.”

He stood. “Then let’s start with the easy part– catch and skin some large dinosaurs.”

“Piece of cake.” She grinned.

CHAPTER 20

Abord the Nautilus, half a mile from the Norwegian west coast

Elle's dreams haunted her.

At the time of triumph her dreams should have been ones of pleasure, wealth, and of the joys to come. But instead, she dreamed of cold, dark water, and of not being able to breathe. Not from drowning, but from someone or something hugging her, crushing her tight and not allowing her lungs to inflate. They were dreams of death. Nightmares.

She cried out, waking herself, just as the Nautilus stopped dead in the water and she was thrown forward.

She blinked and looked about – it was warmer here and through the front viewing panel of the Nautilus she could just make out land in the distance.

“Yes!” she shouted.

She'd made it. She had spent two and a half days travelling at little more than six-knots on an east-south-east heading, and after around 1200 miles, she guessed she was somewhere along the Norwegian coastline or maybe one of the small islands just off its coast.

It didn't matter; wherever she had arrived, it was home. And she was wealthy beyond belief.

Thinking about it, it might be better if she arrived on one of the small islands so she could offload the rubies and hide them. Maybe even scuttle the Nautilus so as not to have awkward questions to answer.

She knew she could get the authorities to believe she had come off a sinking boat after a short cruise. But they would have too many questions if she had an ancient gothic-looking submarine parked on a beach somewhere.

She leaned forward on the console, looking out; it was early evening, and still light, but the sun would go down soon – and the perfect time to arrive was in the cover of darkness.

A blinking light on the console dragged her attention back – and to why she had stopped moving.

She still looked to be at least half a mile from the shoreline, so she doubted she had run aground on a sandbank. But she was dead in the water, even though the engines were complaining that they were working but were clogged by something.

Had she run over a fishing net and got tangled in it? she wondered. That was a possibility.

She looked down at the controls, and then took the handle of the

propulsion regulator. She drew it back to firstly the lowest setting, stopped the Nautilus, and then put it into the only notch for reverse thrust.

The light on the panel came on, and then blinked, indicating it was working. There came a whining noise but no motion.

“Dammit.” She thumped her hand down on the console top and looked out the front window again.

If she was really snagged, could she swim the rest of the way? It was the end of summer, so the water would be cold but bearable. But swimming nearly half a mile in it? That might prove a problem. And she certainly wouldn’t be able to do it if she carried even just one of the gems with her.

“Bullshit,” she seethed. She hadn’t gone through what she had and got this far to abandon all her treasure now.

She folded her arms; the other option was freeing the obstruction.

She looked across to Troy’s pack where she knew sat the single dive mask. She had a sharp knife. If it was a fishing net, she might be able to defoul the propellor and get moving again.

She looked up and out to the distant shoreline. “Don’t compromise now,” she ordered herself.

Besides, she had about another hour of light left. After that, she’d just have to sit here until morning.

She stood back, frowning, as she noticed that the window had lifted a little and the floor began to gently tilt backwards – she suddenly wondered if the old submarine had sprung a leak – *oh shit* – for all she knew the rear was beginning to flood.

She raced back along the dark corridor, her feet pounding on the steel flooring. She checked all the compartments and rushed to the engine and ruby storeroom – the last thing she needed now was for the room to be flooded.

She exhaled with a relieved *whoosh*. *Thank God*, she thought. It was dry and checking the storeroom she saw the stacked rubies still glowing magnificently. She lifted the lid on the energy pod container and saw they were all good as well.

As a precaution, she left them open, just in case there was a leak beneath her feet. If she needed to rush back and grab the gems, she wanted fast access to them.

Elle went back to the command deck and shut all the engines down. The power generation was all okay, so that meant the problem might be the propellers really were fouled. And that left only one thing she could do – she stripped off Nemo’s jacket, her top, and tattered shoes, picked up the dive mask and tucked the knife in her belt loop.

She headed down the steel corridor and got to the hatch. She twisted it open and popped it. Immediately, cold, clean air rushed in,

and she inhaled deeply. Climbing up the ladder she poked her head out and looked one way then the other.

All clear, so she climbed all the way up. There were no boats close by or on any horizon. She shivered; the air was fresh against her skin, and she knew it would be more so when she came back out of the water.

It confirmed what she thought when she saw that the tail fins of the Nautilus was now sitting a little lower than the rest of the vessel in the water – she'd definitely snagged something, she thought. Something heavy.

The steel was cold against her bare feet. She didn't want to do this, but she was up here now, so she'd quickly check the propellor shaft and pray that *was* the problem. Because if there was nothing there, and she had no leak, then she had a whole different set of problems.

"Just don't sink on me, you old pile of junk," she whispered.

Elle walked slowly back along the top of the Nautilus. The water was iron grey, deep, and dark, and as the setting sun was approaching the horizon, the weak light meant she couldn't see more than a few inches below the waterline.

She stood there looking into it for a moment, conscious of the fact that with the sun rapidly going down, every minute she waited it was going to get darker.

She sighed, pulled the mask over her head and down over her nose and eyes, then eased herself over the side.

The water was cold and the freezing jolt of it made her struggle to breathe for a moment, and ducking her head under, the visibility was only about six to ten feet, so she pulled herself along the steel skin of the craft towards the rear where she knew the propellor was.

Elle stopped in the water, and blinked behind the mask as she tried to understand what she was seeing – there was definitely something wrapped around the entire rear of the craft and not just the propellor. It was something huge, that looked like a giant knot of greenish blotchy muscle, with something dangling from its rear and down to finish out of sight in the dark depths below them.

What the hell had she run over? she wondered.

But then it seemed that the knot began to untangle, and what was a bunch of things wrapped around the Nautilus, bloomed open like a giant flower and a pair of large round eyes as big as truck wheels fixed on her.

Giant octopus, her mind screamed as her heart leapt in her chest. She frantically swum backwards, but without swim fins she was pitifully slow in the water. She then grabbed the side of the Nautilus and tried to find one of the handholds she could use to drag herself out.

There was a long steel rib that she grabbed onto, and she began to pull herself up and out. She lifted up and didn't even feel the bone-chilling wind against her skin, or the remnants of barnacles scraping her knees and shins, but instead she had moved into fight or flight mode, and right now all she wanted to do was get to the hatch, dive in, and lock it behind her.

Unfortunately, the monstrous creature had other ideas.

She felt the slap of the slimy tip of a tentacle against her thigh and then it wrapped around her. Elle screamed as with one quick tug it pulled her back into the water.

And then released her.

She spluttered back to the surface and swam back to the side of the Nautilus again. As before, she clambered up the side, coughing water from her lungs. And just like before, as soon as she got onto the submarine's surface, she was grabbed and flung back out into the water.

Elle came back to the surface, breathing hard, and beginning to panic.

She realized then that the thing was playing with her. Eventually it would tire of its game. And then what? Would it eat her, or just swim away and leave her alone?

She had a pretty good idea that there was no way it would just go away. Her only chance was to get back inside the ship. And trying to go about it the same way as before was futile.

So, instead of swimming back to where she had tried to climb the last few times, she turned and swam hard and fast to the front of the craft. She wasn't far away, and in seconds, she was at the front of the submarine where there was a lip of steel that allowed her to climb up onto the deck fast.

She put her head down and sprinted to the hatch. From the side of the craft the monstrous octopus creature came up over the side as a boiling mass of flaying tentacles.

Elle leapt and landed in the hatch, banging her hip, and side of her head as she went down. She immediately got to her feet and tried to close the hatch, but a fat tentacle was already snaking in, and its questing tip was searching for her.

She backed away and saw that the suckers on it were actually moving, opening and closing, like hundreds of plate-sized mouths each with a ring of serrated teeth as they tried to find the soft flesh of her body and latch on.

Elle backed away, and just watched.

It couldn't get in. It was way too big to fit inside the hatch and not strong enough to tear the steel open and make the hole bigger.

"Fuck you!" she yelled.

She decided she'd wait it out after all.

But then the Nautilus tilted. Perhaps as the creature pulled more of its massive bulk up onto the surface deck.

"Oh no, no, no." Elle looked around.

She needed a weapon, something, anything, to try and discourage the monster from feeling around inside and not allowing her to close the hatch.

The Nautilus tilted a little more, and she heard the bottle of brandy in the control room fall from the desk where she had left it – an idea came, and she turned and raced back along the metal corridor.

Inside the control room she snatched up the bottle, and also grabbed the box of antique safety matches with huge heads she had found earlier. She turned and came back as fast as she could along the sloping gangway.

There were two tentacles now, still searching for her and the creature had managed to squeeze about fifteen feet of itself inside the submarine.

Elle darted forward to then splash the brandy over it. The creature started to thrash, as the liquid must have stung its mucous-coated skin.

"That's nothing," Elle hissed through gritted teeth and struck a match and threw it toward the beast.

The brandy caught and lit along the length of one of the tentacles. From outside there came a squealing, and the tentacle quickly withdrew, leaving puddles of burning mucous, and an acrid stench that stung Elle's eyes and made her cough.

She held her breath and she stepped on the first rung of the ladder. It was slimy and she looked up, frozen for a moment because she knew if it darted back down now it could get at her.

Go, she demanded of herself and lunged up to grab the hatch, and pull it closed. By then the puddles of burning brandy had gone out, and she bent to lift the bottle with about an inch left in the bottom.

The Nautilus was still tilted, telling her the thing was still hanging on but at least it was outside, and she was safe inside. She staggered back to the control room and once there lifted the bottle to her lips, upended it, and drank down the remaining liquid.

Elle felt the bloom of warmth hit her belly and let the bottle drop as she sucked in a few deep breaths. She leaned forward on the console, shut her eyes, and waited for her heartbeat to slow.

She'd wait it out, she thought. Even if she sat here for days. At least it couldn't get her. After a while it'd get bored and go back to wherever the hell it came from.

She was wrong.

The Nautilus tilted even more, and then with a heart stopping sound

of tearing steel, the upper hatch was ripped away. Then the thing began to roll the submarine on its side. And it began to fill with water.

Elle screamed as a wave of freezing water came surging up at her. Did it know what it was doing? she wondered. She bet it did.

She ran in circles, not knowing what to do. It wouldn't take long for the craft to fill with enough for it to go under. And then she was dead.

She pulled open drawers, and opened cabinet doors, but didn't know what she was looking for.

Then she found the wooden box and ripped it open. "Oh God, thank you."

Inside were two silver revolvers with magnificent engraving along the barrel and with bone handles. There were also six slugs nestled in their own compartments at the top.

She pulled one of the guns out, and grabbed at the bullets, getting hold of two. She flicked open the chamber and loaded them with shaky hands, and then snapped it shut.

But the water continued to rise and in minutes more, she was trapped in a final bubble of air in the control room. She looked out the front viewing port as the water surface was climbing above the window now. She was going down.

She kept her head and the revolver above the water, and as she watched, the huge beast settled against the windows and stared in at her.

She looked back at it. "You came from the island, didn't you?" She felt doomed. "So did I."

The water was at her chin, and then there came a cracking sound and looking back to the windows she saw that the octopus-thing had attached several of its massive tentacles to the window and was using its titanic strength to pull them out.

There was a squealing, grating noise as a beak like that of a parrot, but the size of a doorway, scraped down the glass, gouging a line as it went.

It wanted her. She knew. It wanted to punish her for burning it. And then it would eat what was left.

Elle suddenly realized there was no way out.

She lifted the gun.

"Go to hell!" she screamed and fired.

The glass exploded and the ocean surged in. As well as the huge cephalopod.

In seconds more, she felt the cold slimy embrace as she was handed roughly toward the beak.

The pain was unbearable.

By the following morning, the massive orthocone had tired of its

new metal toy and left the area.

Inside the rear of the craft now sitting on the sea bottom in just a hundred feet of water, the drekka eggs, now free of their iridium-loaded earth that had been keeping them in hibernation, all hatched.

There were four in the energy chamber, and another eleven stacked outside the storage vault. Some of the eggs held two of the small spiny grub-like creatures, and some only one.

Eventually, twenty-four of them made it to the surface and like a school of spiny slugs, they swam towards the empty shoreline.

CHAPTER 21

Viking village, Lemuria, beneath the ice of Greenland

Troy noticed that Yrsa seemed to be keeping her distance. Or at least keeping to herself. He guessed it was because she was now involved in all the duties as the clan leader and had a lot on her mind. But at least they were still sending messages back and forth via Druuna, and Troy got what he needed.

And there was something else; he reached into his pouch at his waist and drew forth the iron arrowhead and ran his thumb over the edge – it was sharp, and harder than anything he could have made from stone.

There would be more coming, and he had convinced Yrsa to task Druuna with obtaining the right wood for huge bows and arrows, and also smelting many more of the large-sized arrow heads for Viking-sized bows and arrows.

But try as he might, none of the men saw any value or honor in firing sticks at the huge beasts. However, Anne had more luck with the women, who thought it fun at first to try out the new weapons. Then they got better. And then they were hitting their targets every time, and their five-foot-long arrows were impacting with the force of small missiles.

Troy bet a few hunts with the women bringing down the beasts, with great accuracy, and from a safe distance, and the entire clan would be using the bows and arrows. He didn't think he was breaking any rules about new cultural norms, as from history, Vikings did have bows and arrows, but just not all of them. Perhaps this clan's ancestors arrived here before they had adopted the newer weapons.

Troy turned to where Anne was working with a group of the women. Right now, several of the clan sat around a fire talking and laughing while they scraped the dinosaur hides for them. Each sheet was dozens of feet wide, and the women worked to remove all the skin and subcutaneous fat from the underside and just leave the toughened hide.

There were repairs to be made, but the Vikings had a strong adhesive that set like flexible resin and allowed the patching of any spear holes in the skins. They'd also use it after they had sewn the skin sheets together making the balloon shape, as the glued strips along under the stitching to make it airtight.

Anne worked with the women on the design and ensuring that what they ended up with was an actual balloon shape and try and at least nod to some sort of aerodynamics.

He smiled as he watched her; her language skills had improved fantastically, and she got along well with them.

Troy estimated they needed just a few more to make the massive balloon. The basket was already planned but wouldn't be fully constructed until it was at the top of the mountain, and that was so the weight could be distributed amongst the climbers.

Once the balloon was done, and they had stocked supplies, they would need warm furs that Yrsa promised would be coming. And then, Troy guessed they were done with construction. Then they'd just need a lot of material to burn to create enough warm air to fill the balloon and keep it inflated for the entire voyage.

Troy walked a few paces away and stood with his hands on his hips and looked up at the mountain. It rose above the landscape and was an imposing sight. The top looked like it was shrouded in clouds, but he knew it was an ice ceiling, and the peak continued on to punch through at the top.

In a strange way, the Mother of the Sky had a foot in both worlds – like him – Troy's modern one, and the primordial one of the hidden, mysterious island.

He searched for the small entrance that allowed their ascent to the top but couldn't see it from here. Their last task would be to scale up inside with half a dozen of the strongest warriors. It would take strong arms and backs to climb the mountain with all their equipment. He didn't even want to think yet about the complexities of holding the bag while they tried to fill it with hot air.

Anne came and stood beside him. "We're making good progress."

He nodded. "Looks like we're nearly there." Troy scratched his head. "What have we missed? Have we thought of everything?"

"I think as far as materials go, we're probably okay," she replied.

"Then the final thing we'll need is luck." He turned to her. "The wind needs to be light enough to allow us to fill the balloon. But then strong enough to carry us away. And in the right direction."

She nodded. "A good breeze and we can travel safely at between fifty and seventy-five miles per hour." She looked up at him. "That's a trip of between fifteen and twenty hours."

He scoffed. "After what we've been through, we can do that standing on our heads."

"That's good," she scoffed softly, "Because the longer we stay in the air, and stay out of the water, we have a chance."

"Will it hold?" He nodded toward the balloon.

"It has to," she replied.

He laughed in return. "Well then, that's good enough for me." He then looked up toward a distant hill which was the highest point in the village. He turned back to her. "I'm going to check something out."

Back soon.”

Troy headed up the slope and continued to the farthest point in the village area. He needed to remind himself how far they needed to travel to get to the mountain and what sort of terrain.

He already expected he'd need a large group of the clan members, as there'd be a lot to carry. Plus, climbing up inside the mountain would be both arduous and dangerous work – he was asking a lot of the clan so just hoped he remained in Yrsa's good graces.

After trekking for several hours, he finally reached the top of the tall hill and then climbed a boulder to stand at the peak. He put his hands on his hips and sucked in the cool air. It was a mind-blowing view over the island – the massive banyan-like trees to the east, where he knew Odin's Fortress was nestled in under the roots of one of the biggest trees he had ever seen in his life. He wondered if the dragon was still there guarding it.

Bat-like creatures glided from tree to tree, from a distance looking little more than sparrow-sized, but he knew they stood bigger than a man, and had no qualms with taking on and trying to eat a human.

To the west he could see the sliver of the sea that was surrounding the island, and beyond that he could just make out through the mist the massive cliff wall that walled them inside this giant petri dish of prehistoric animals and the weird paths evolution had taken.

He then turned back to the north and the Mother of the Sky. He looked up at the huge mountain – when he thought more about the tasks ahead of him it made his head swim and he felt overwhelmed. Each and every step they were about to take from here was life threatening.

He snorted softly. Like just about every step he had taken since he set foot on this mysterious island, he thought.

He didn't know how long he stood there, letting his mind drift, but after a while his sixth sense told him he was being watched. And there was something or someone behind him. He slowly pulled out his sword from his back scabbard and spun, holding it up.

Yrsa stood there watching him. “Your reflexes have improved, Troyson.” A small smile curved her lips. “But this is not a good place for dreaming.”

He laughed softly and sheathed his sword. She didn't have her war paint on, but her hair was done with two large braids framing her face and strung with interesting items again. But as a chieftain, they were now bits of precious stone, gold, and exotic feathers.

She followed his gaze to where he had been staring. “The mountain mother allowed you to live last time. Will it do it again?”

He turned back. “I hope so. But that depends on our preparation, determination, and your help.”

“Depends on how bad you want to get home,” she said and stepped up beside him. “I followed you here.”

He grinned. “I can tell.” He looked up at her, but once again she didn’t seem as tall as he remembered. “Why did you follow me?”

She sat down on the rock’s edge overlooking the deep valley. “Sit. Talk to me,” she said.

He did.

“I consulted Alruna, the wise woman.” She turned to him.

Troy remembered her; it was the old women who had tended his wounds after the arena fight with Birwulf.

“I asked her to consult the bones and tell me if you would stay or go.” Her mouth turned down.

“What did she say?” he asked.

She gave him a lopsided smile. “She said yes. And no. She said a part of you will leave, but a part of you will stay.” She shrugged. “Even she didn’t understand what that meant.”

He smiled. “I just hope that doesn’t mean I’m going to be chopped into pieces.”

Yrsa laughed, but then her face grew serious, and she reached out to place a hand flat on his chest. “I know I will always have this bit. In here.”

Troy placed a hand over hers, and almost said the words to her, but then couldn’t.

She turned her hand around to grip and squeeze his for a moment, her eyes sad. “I know you want to tell me. But you can’t,” she sighed. “You have one foot here, and another back on your homeland.” She let go of his hand. “And I can’t change that.”

After a moment she looked up at the darkening sky. “We must get back. Night is when the hunters come out, and we have far to go.”

Troy nodded, realizing he’d been gone most of the day, and he stood and held out a hand. She took it even though she didn’t need it.

Yrsa paused, looking like she was about to say something, but then froze, and cocked her head.

“The clan,” she said and turned and began to sprint away.

“What is it?” he asked.

“Attack,” she said and bounded back down the side of the steep hill, with Troy trying his best to keep up with her long limbs.

It had taken Troy a good three hours to scale to the top of the hill. But sprinting down behind Yrsa, who never stopped or even slowed, meant he cut that time by more than half.

As he approached the village, he still heard nothing, but knew that the sound of his own raspy breathing was probably masking anything.

They approached the small clearing at the rear of the village, and

Yrsa threw an arm out to slow him. He was glad for the halt and sucked in deep breaths to cool his burning lungs.

They were just about five hundred yards from the first of the huts at the rear of the village and needed to pass through a small grove of trees, but Yrsa moved into her hunting mode and approached silently and cautiously.

She had said something had attacked the village. Was it the drekka? he wondered. Anne was in there. Troy drew his sword, and he saw Yrsa now carried a smaller axe in her hands.

From behind one of the trees, two older women rushed out. It near gave Troy a heart attack but they crowded in at Yrsa, speaking fast, and she gathered them in close. Troy stood behind and listened to them explain what had happened.

The Aegir clan, the water clan, had attacked the village. The warriors who were left had put up a fight but were overwhelmed by the greater numbers and many died.

The remaining warriors, women, and children were taken as slaves. Several had escaped into the forest and became scattered.

Then one bowed and looked up at Yrsa with terrified eyes. "They killed Skarde."

Yrsa gripped the woman. "Did he die in battle?"

The woman nodded. "He fought like a berserker."

"He is raising cups with Odin now." Yrsa's eyes smoldered with fire. "Are they still here?" she asked through a clenched jaw.

"No," the woman replied. "They are gone now. We tracked them for a while, and all of them have left."

They crept into the village and saw many of the huts burned, bodies strewn about, and the equivalent of buckets of blood splashing the ground everywhere. And there was worse to come – in what had once been a form of village square, there was a nine-foot-tall pole, and fixed to its top was the severed head of the old chieftain.

Troy expected tears, or curses, or something from Yrsa to release her grief but instead she stood calmly before the head, looking up at it.

Her voice was calm. "They will be back," Yrsa said as she straightened. "First, we need to find the scattered clan. Then we need to call in warriors who have gone hunting." Her eyes narrowed as she looked at the ghastly head of Skarde and she seemed to be talking more to him than them. "And then we will go to their village."

"You'll be outnumbered," Troy said softly.

Yrsa rounded on him. "So, we should do nothing but wait for them to come back and finish us off? Or should we scurry away and hide in the forest like Shjembers?"

Troy knew that a Shjember was like a small, scaled mouse. He

stared back, holding her ferocious gaze. “No, we need to get our people back, and we need to plan.” He lifted his chin. “Then we attack. And win.”

Troy quickly learned more from Yrsa about the clan that had attacked their village and where they were – it seems they were coastal but different from the ones Troy had seen when they ventured along the coastline in the Nautilus and inhabited the jungles and lowlands to the east of the mountain.

It would be a few days’ trek even if they moved fast. Yrsa wanted to leave immediately, so did Troy, because Anne had also been taken.

Yrsa had told him that the men warriors would more than likely all be put to death, perhaps as a sacrifice to Odin, or maybe meet their fate in Aegir’s own form of an arena. The young women and children would be integrated into the tribe. As for Anne, as she was an anomaly, well, they were also cannibals.

As the dozen warriors returned from their hunt, they immediately went into furious shouts and stomping about what had happened, as many of their wives and children had been taken. Troy stopped them from simply sprinting off into the jungle to enact retribution with promises of slaying all the invaders, but knew he could only hold them, and Yrsa, back for another half day at most.

He sent out Bjorn, who was the best tracker, to act as a scout. He was to follow the invading Aegir raiding party and report back with information about their numbers, weapons, and anything else that would be of value to them.

Troy then set about creating a battle plan. He would also take the women who were proficient with bows and arrows, six of them, and he organized them into a fighting unit. They would organize themselves into two rows – when one row fired, the other would be notching an arrow, fire, and repeat – aim for the eyes and neck, he had told them – it would mean a constant flow of arrows, and given their aim, it should decimate and demoralize charging warriors.

The next line of attack would be the huge warriors who would move in two blocks and be the pincers in his attack. Other strategies he would tell them when he formulated them after finding out more about the Aegir clan’s fortifications.

Troy would like to have spent more time in preparation, but he knew he couldn’t hold them back anymore.

Troy stood before the group of giants. “Be patient and smart,” he had told them. “Then we will kill them and win the day. If we are impatient, and rush, then they will kill us, and our people will be slaves forever.”

Troy packed his bow over his shoulder, had them load up some

dried meat and water, and he thought they were ready – almost.

The men and Yrsa first needed to apply their ferocious-looking war paint as black tiger stripes across their bodies and over their eyes. Their eight-foot-plus muscular frames made for a frightening set of giants, and he could imagine that the clan they went to make war on would be equally as big and fearsome.

He nodded to an impatient-looking Yrsa, and she then turned to her warriors. She raised her axe high.

“No mercy. Kill them all.” She turned and began to run in the direction of the Aegir water clan.

Anne had a coarse rope around her neck and was led like a dog by one of the huge warriors. The other men who had been captured were also strung together by the neck but with their hands tied behind their backs.

The men had various wounds that had been quickly patched to staunch their bleeding. There was one man with a missing eye, sword holes, and by the look of it, a broken wrist.

The children were also bound and walked silently by another group. She looked at the warriors who had taken them – they seemed bigger, broader, and had thicker brow ridges, as though somehow less evolved.

Even their weapons were cruder with their axe heads made of large stones, and some just had clubs that were little more than straight logs.

She could understand most of what they said, and she didn't like any of it. The captured men were to be used for their games and to be offered up to Odin. The children and young women would be taken as clan brides, servants, with the older ones to be slaves.

As for her, she heard that word again: *'foeda'* – she now knew what that meant – food.

She turned to look over her shoulder. *Come on, Troy, please hurry*, she begged.

Anne was yanked forward as they continued their fast walk. Her feet and legs ached, as they had been moving for hours on end.

They only slowed when they came to a huge mound of rocks that made a sheer wall at least a hundred feet high, and at its base was a cave.

The raiding party headed straight in but paused at the entrance. As her eyes adjusted to the gloom she could see there was a wall built across the middle of the tunnel and other warriors shouted a greeting who stood at its top – her heart sank – no one was coming down this path without being seen.

The gate was pulled back and she and the other captives were

pulled inside.

The cave soon lightened and opened out and then no more than fifty feet further they came out to the village. Fires burned out in the open, and the huts were bigger, more ramshackle, with refuse dumped just outside their doors and many had animal skins hung over the openings instead of wood.

They also seemed to have their own arenas and other places of entertainment – one being a huge pit that had sharpened poles around its edge.

Anne noticed that the villagers seemed to give it a wide berth, and though she couldn't see what was in there, she guessed if you went in, you probably wouldn't be coming out.

There were other large fenced off areas, but these were above ground, and by the dark stains surrounding them, she bet the sport inside would be bloodletting.

More villagers came out of the huts to greet the returning raiding party and hail their warriors as victors. Their lead warrior, whose name she had learned was Brunor, raised his axe.

The man was huge at over eight and a half feet tall and had a large skin over his shoulders with a down coat that was probably tight black feathers, but looked like buffalo skin, the effect of it being to make him look like a giant grizzly bear.

The ogre's face was battle scarred, and he turned slowly, holding up his bloody axe, grinning and showing a mouth that had a missing tooth at the front.

From the far side of the village the crowd parted and a decrepit old man with a crown made of an animal skull and cloak of soiled, white feathers limped forward. He saluted and greeted the warriors.

"Vigorm," Brunor's greeting was as disinterested as possible.

Anne could tell by the way Brunor looked at him, there was little respect, and she bet that sooner or later the big guy was going to challenge the little guy for clan leadership. Already, the clan's respect seemed to tilt more toward Brunor than any other.

The Aegir women gathered up the youngsters and herded them away. Some of the young men were also taken, probably to begin their life of hard servitude, and a few young girls were kept in a pen as the warriors eyed them either as potential wives, bed mates, or perhaps even as more food, she thought dismally.

The chieftain straightened and walked towards her, his yellowing eyes fixed on her, and his mouth leering. The man was short for the tribe at perhaps only just on seven feet and she guessed about the same height as Troy now.

He hobbled right up to her and leaned forward, bringing his face close to hers. He placed a finger in the front of her tunic top to pull it

forward and peer in. Though she had her neck tied, her hands were free, and she slapped his hand away and he in turn grabbed her hair and shook her, making her entire body feel like it was going to come apart. He let her go and her head swum for a moment.

Vigorm then felt her arms, pressing the flesh. He turned to Brunor and grinned. "For tonight's feast."

"After," Brunor grunted.

After what? she wondered. Her heart sank, and she stood with arms hanging listless by her side, and now with a splitting headache from the shaking and dehydration.

Vigorm then made his way to stand before the captured warriors. Each glared, still with fire in their bellies. He stopped in front of one of the captured men that Anne had seen in their village. The chieftain tilted his head as he looked up into the bloody face.

"Will you fight for your freedom?" he asked.

"Yes," came the immediate reply.

The old man nodded, and walked to the next man and asked the same question. He did it to all of them, eliciting the same reply.

As he came back, he slowed behind one, and brought out a dagger. In a swift motion, he reached in and sliced horizontally along the inside of the man's elbow, severing the tendons.

The captured man whose hands were bound behind him, grunted in pain as blood dripped to the ground.

The old chief grinned as he came around in front of the warrior again and looked up into his face. "Then you shall fight for your freedom." He turned to Brunor. "Show them who is stronger."

Brunor grinned and dropped his cloak revealing a gorilla-like upper body and drew forth a massive axe and headed to one of the penned areas.

Anne felt her heart sink as she knew how it was going to play out – the warrior had been wounded to ensure there was no chance of winning. It was little more than a display of violence for the rest of the clan.

The wounded man had the binding on his wrists cut and he was pushed inside. An axe and sword were thrown to the ground before him.

Blood ran down his arm, and though he still had movement, it looked weak and limited in what he could do. It also seemed to have been his good arm, his fighting arm, that was weakened.

He tried to pick up the massive axe in his left hand, but the blade was a two-handed weapon, and he gave up and instead snatched up the large sword. He then stood ready.

Brunor swung his big axe back and forward, grinning like a feral beast. His own warriors cheered him, and shouted jeers at the

wounded man and advice to Brunor on which limb to remove from his opponent first.

Anne wished there was some way to help and looked at his still bound clan members; their eyes were furious but knew their own fate would be the same.

“Begin,” the chieftain said.

Brunor darted sideways as he swung the axe, and the blade that was nearly the size of a truck wheel sliced the air, but the wounded warrior moved quickly and easily ducked out of the way.

He thrust back with his sword, catching Brunor on the side of his breast piece and gouging the toughened material. Anne knew that if the warrior wasn't impaired, the match might not go the way the huge Brunor intended.

But the blood continued to seep from the wound in his arm, draining his strength and after just more minutes it hung dead at his side. Time was against him.

Brunor fainted one way, and then came back the other. He mock swung the axe, and when the wounded warrior moved to the opposite side, Brunor instead jammed the butt of his weapon into his opponent's ribs just beside his useless arm.

The air whooshed from the man's lungs, and Brunor then slashed back, lower down, carving deeply into the meat of his thigh. The warrior went down on one knee and Brunor used a clenched fist to backhand punch the man in the face.

He dropped his sword as he fell backward. Brunor lumbered closer and just kicked his sword back toward him.

The wounded man bent to grab it up, and in the second or two he was bent forward, Brunor swung his massive axe first up, and then down, entering the man's body at the side of the neck, cleaving downwards with so much force, the axe cut through flesh, cartilage, and his upper ribcage, and went on to exit through his side.

The other captives howled, and Anne felt dizzy from shock at seeing the man be physically chopped in two. She shut her eyes, not wanting to see any more.

As they were being herded away, she caught Druuna's eye. He nodded and attempted a smile, perhaps trying to reassure her, but his sloped shoulders told her that he expected that was what was in store for them.

As she was led away, she passed by the area that was an excavated pit and glanced in. It looked to be a twenty-foot-deep hole, circular, and around the edge where the wall met the dirt floor was a narrow trough. However, the only thing in there was what looked like a six-foot-tall volcano complete with hole in the top.

As she passed it by, she got a whiff of something emanating from its

depths – it smelled like burned oil, and something else that hinted at lemons. She had no idea what it could be.

As she stared into the pit, the leash around her neck was tugged hard and as she began to stumble away, she saw the brutal clan throw the two halves of her slain clan member into the pit, where the body parts came to rest against the strange mound.

She suddenly had a thought that perhaps the fast slaughtering at the hands of Brunor might have meant that the wounded warrior had been the lucky one. For the rest of them, there could be something far worse coming.

EPISODE 21

The worst monsters live in the hearts of us all

CHAPTER 22

The deep forest, no-clan land, Lemuria

Yrsa held up a hand to stop the clan as Bjorn came sprinting back to them, breathing hard, and had to bend over to suck in three deep breaths before he could speak. He finally stood tall before Yrsa.

"They have returned to the village. It is beyond a giant wall and through a cave. I saw inside and there is a gate. Guarded. It is always watched." He shook his head. "We would be trapped in there."

Yrsa grunted her displeasure. "Can we scale the wall, or go around it?"

"It is high. Impossible to climb, I think. And runs both directions for a long time. Maybe we can go around, but it would take many extra days," Bjorn replied.

Yrsa paced. "We do not have many days. Every day, more of our people will be killed."

"Then fight your enemy where they are not," Troy said, remembering the words of an ancient Chinese general and philosopher.

Yrsa and the clan turned to him.

"That has no meaning. How can you fight your enemy if they are not there?" Brogdor, the bald one, said, his face creased in anger.

"Listen to him," Yrsa demanded. "Troyson was a warrior in his home world. And he is my war counsel now."

That was news to Troy, but he guessed she was pumping up his tires to make the clan pay attention to him.

He stepped into the center of the group of huge men and women. "The Aegir clan think the cliff is impassable. And that is what they want us to think as well." He looked along their faces. "So, they also think they do not need to watch the wall. And instead, they will be focused on the gate cave. But for us, attacking there would be suicide." He turned to them. "Scaling the wall will be extremely difficult. But unexpected. And then arriving when unexpected..."

"Means we will be there, but they will not." Yrsa smiled cruelly. "And we kill them before they even know we are coming," she finished.

"Take us to an area of the wall away from the clan cave entrance place," Troy said to Bjorn. "Nothing is impossible, if you think it is possible."

Yrsa looked up at the darkening sky, and then back at Troy. He knew what she was thinking – scaling a sheer cliff, hundreds of feet high, was hard in daytime light. Doing it in the dark would be deadly.

Troy had done free climbing before, so was confident he could do it. But the huge bodies of the Vikings might not be so agile, especially with all their iron weapons, and they couldn't afford to lose any of them for the coming battle.

He nodded. "We scout for a suitable place and begin our climb at first light."

Yrsa nodded, relieved. She turned to Bjorn. "Find us a way up, at least five hundred paces from their gate opening."

He turned and ran off. The clan followed him.

Anne peered through the door watching as fires were lit around the village for the evening. Ominously, they were also being lit around the arenas.

She was in a small room that had drying plants around the edges giving off a herb-like aroma. Hanging from rafters above her were sides of meat from unidentifiable animals. It was obviously the meat larder, and she hated to even think about why she had been put in here.

There were larger rooms where the captured Fjall women and children were kept, and just across the compound from her, there was an open pen where the warriors were bound. All were sitting quietly now.

She noticed that they were given neither food nor water, and she bet that was because the thinking was, why waste it on them? They were as good as dead anyway.

It was still early evening, and the ogish Brunor and some of the other warriors walked about, sometimes taunting the captives, or supervising whatever events were to be held that evening.

She bet that they were going to be part of the festivities whether they wanted it or not. Anne just hoped she survived them, and she looked back over her shoulder as if seeing through the wall.

"Come on, Troy," she whispered.

She turned back to the crack in the door and watched as fires on the top of poles were lit around the pit arena. Whatever was to happen down in there was probably going to be the focus.

She saw again another of the captured warriors taken from their holding pen. And once again one of his arms was slashed to weaken and disable him. Then another of the Aegir clan practiced his sword skills on the hapless man.

Cowards, she thought. All of them.

Brave and strong warriors didn't need to only fight weakened opponents. She wondered what the outcome would have been if the Fjall had all their warriors from the hunting parties when the raiding clan invaded.

As she watched she saw the crowd gathering near the pit, and they began to pour something into it. The liquid was tipped in around the outside as if circling whatever was in there. As she watched they tossed in a lit torch, and flames rose.

One of the captives was then selected and led toward the pit. The men jostled for a view, and she thought it looked like several were betting money on what was about to happen down there. She frowned as she watched and tried to work out what was happening.

Roasting fires were also lit, and an extremely large man came toward her hut. Anne hid back in amongst the hanging meats, not wanting to end up threaded onto a barbecue spit.

The door opened, and then shut as the huge man held a long butchering knife in one hand. He looked around and laughed in a bass deep voice.

“Fear not, little one. You are not for this night’s feasting,” he said as he reached up to cut down a huge side of something that was a pale color and had salt rubbed into it.

He bent to peer in at her through the hanging meats. “But it is the chieftain’s day of birth celebration tomorrow night.” He smiled ominously. “Then you will be joining us.” He laughed again and lifted the side of meat onto his broad shoulder and turned to the door. He still held the knife and used the same hand to pull the door inwards.

Like Hell I will, she thought.

Anne took her chance and sprinted toward the opening door, and then around the huge Viking. He roared his anger and threw his huge knife that *thunked* into the ground beside her, but she was already out and running hard.

She darted in behind another of the huts and crouched. The entrance to where she had been brought in and through the cave was just down the hill. But she had to follow the pathway through the center of the village. Or try and make her way a little further out in the thick jungle-like foliage.

It was dark now and gave her good cover and she guessed this area should be safe from predators or the Vikings wouldn’t have made their camp here.

She looked up; she knew her biggest problem would be trying to get past the gate – it was far too high for her to climb and had several of the Vikings on top keeping watch, so that ruled out secretly opening and closing the door in its center.

And if she crept out into the jungle, could she make her way back, or would she need to climb the mountainous cliffs? By herself. In the dark.

Anne stared out into the jungle; it was so dark once beyond the glow of the firelight, it turned to ink. There was no moon or stars in

here and also as they were in the lee of the cliffs, it shut off any other light sources.

She sucked in a huge breath, calming herself. The darkness would be the same outside, and one thing they had found was at night, unless it was absolutely necessary, you hunkered down. There were creatures out there who could see you, while you couldn't see them. And they all ate meat.

Shit, she sighed. She knew she wouldn't make a hundred feet, let alone trying to find her way back to Troy.

Think, she demanded of herself.

And then it came to her – *a diversion* – she needed a diversion.

And one of the best diversions there was, was fire. She half smiled, remembering using the same tactic when they wanted to distract the guards back at the museum in Oslo. It worked and it gave them time to find the dragon's eye embedded in the Viking longship.

"And I wish we didn't find it," she whispered. "Because here I am."

Anne made her plans – there was a burning torch stuck in the ground at the end of the village. If she could make it to that and pull it out, she could use it to set fire to one of the huts.

That would surely bring people running, or at least grab their attention until they managed to put it out. She estimated it would give her five minutes – five minutes to either head out into the jungle and try and find a way around or over the cliffs. Or maybe even try her luck at sneaking out through the gates.

Surely, Troy would try and save her by then. So, she bet if she made it out, and headed back, there was a good chance she'd run into him.

She felt better – now she had options. Anne slowly rose to her feet but stayed in a crouch. She coiled her muscles, readying herself, just as a huge hand slammed down on her shoulder.

It pummeled her to the ground, and she was grabbed by the hair and shaken. She grabbed the hand with both of hers to stop her hair being pulled out, and was turned around to see the big, broad face of the oaf who had been in the meat room – of course he would have still been looking for her.

Goyner, she later found out his name was, put a leash around her neck and dragged her out into the open. And that caught the attention of some of the warriors. And Brunor.

The big man grinned and waved Goyner over.

Goyner was a big man but broader of stomach than tall, and he was half a head shorter than the huge Brunor.

The huge man grinned down at Anne. "You look like a child but are a grown woman." He looked her over from head to foot, and then walked around her. "Are you betrothed?"

She didn't like the way he looked at her, and she thought quick.

“Yes I am.”

Brunor nodded. “Is he a small man, like you?”

What to tell him, she wondered. “Yes.”

He smiled and motioned for Goyner to hand her to him. Brunor put his hand on the back of her neck. He grinned down at her. “Tonight, you will not have a half man, but will be my bride.”

Her eyes widened at the thought of the giant on top of her. He’d kill her. “My husband is a mighty warrior and will take your head,” she blurted out. “You have no honor.”

Brunor snorted and pulled her next to him and faced the pit. “I think if your husband were here, he would be next into the *morwi* pit.”

The what? she wondered.

He nodded to several of his warriors who held a struggling one of her clan members between them. He was walked to the edge of the pit, had his wrist bindings cut, and this time they didn’t slash his arms or hobble him, but instead just pushed him in.

The crowd jostled forward, looking down, and there was laughter and more of their furious betting. Brunor stepped forward, dragging Anne with him.

“Now we will see,” he said.

And Anne did.

She could now see that inside the pit there was a ring of fire around its outer edge, probably to stop the captives from trying to climb out, she surmised. There were also two warriors standing at the top each with a pile of rocks at their feet.

She had expected to see the mutilated remnants of the warrior that Brunor had cleaved in two, but there was no sign of any part of him.

Anne then looked across at the captured warrior. She didn’t recognize him, but he looked along the people at the rim, his jaw firm, and nothing but contempt in his eyes. He rubbed his wrists that had been bound and then flexed huge hands.

The man waited calmly for whatever fate the tribe inflicted on him. Perhaps he thought that as he was uninjured, he stood a chance at prevailing at whoever or whatever came.

At a word from Brunor the two men with the pile of rocks at their feet each lifted one in both hands.

Anne thought they were going to begin to stone the man, but instead, they aimed their missiles at the six-foot-high mound at the pit’s center. Time and again they thumped into its sides, but their target was obviously the hole in the top.

Finally, one of the rocks went into the dark, ten-inch-wide hole, and the crowd cheered. And then they went silent, their unblinking gaze on the mound.

Even the Fjall warrior in the pit saw what their attention was on

and turned to watch himself.

Time seemed to stand still, and every sound around seemed to drop away to nothing as the clan, the captured warrior, and Anne couldn't draw their eyes away.

Then that smell began to rise from the pit. And that weird acrid, citrus odor became stronger. Though she could hear nothing, the man in the pit began to back away from the mini volcano, until his legs came closer to the flames, and he stopped.

She strained to hear and tilted her head and concentrated. She was sure then she could detect a tiny clicking sound, like the snap of knitting needles working furiously.

Anne's brow creased in confusion, as she saw something emerging from the top of the mini volcano. It came slowly, and then she saw what it was; it was the stone that had been thrown in there. It was being pushed out.

Like a cork from a bottle, it emerged, and then rolled down the sides of the mound, and then her mouth dropped open as following it a boiling mass of insects were vomited up – ants – all of them an angry red-orange color, and each at least ten inches long.

Belatedly, and uselessly, a sword was thrown down to the man. The warrior lifted it and swung it back and forth before himself like a scythe. Many of the ants were swept aside, but the dozens appearing soon turned to hundreds, and then many hundreds, and they kept coming.

They reminded her of some species of ant back home: *Solenopsis*, she thought they were called. "Fire ants," she whispered.

Or they were some prehistoric and mutated form of them.

Then the first of them reached the man, and the crowd at the top of the arena brayed with laughter, jeered him, or shouted down advice to try and keep alive for a few more seconds, and perhaps win their bets.

The captive stomped down, but where he flattened them and lifted his foot, the hardy creatures just got back up on their six legs and continued to come after him.

They climbed his legs, and he brushed them, beat at them, and even tried cutting them off. When he was nearly covered, they did what she had heard was their trademark attack strategy on a larger animal – through some sort of chemical signaling they all stung at once.

The man's scream was so horrifying and agonized, Anne gritted her teeth and narrowed her eyes, as if she also felt his pain. His body went rigid as the furious swarm climbed on and dug hundreds of their barbed stingers into his flesh.

He fell over onto his side with the ants still stinging and even more continuing the venomous attack. His body jerked and shuddered as if he was receiving a violent electric shock.

Anne went to turn away then, but Brunor gripped her neck even tighter and made her face the horrific ordeal.

“Watch,” he warned.

She shut her eyes.

“Open them or I will cut them away.” Brunor squeezed her neck until she saw stars for a moment.

She watched. And wished she hadn’t.

After a few more minutes the man stopped his erratic jerking, and his body was still. But then it began to gently move again. And then she saw why; it wasn’t the warrior’s muscles that were doing the moving but the ants.

The small, but immensely powerful insects were now working on dismantling the body – first went the soft and easy to get at pieces such as the eyes, ears, tongue, and genitals. Then the fingers and toes were clipped off, and she watched as a line of the fire red creatures carried them above their heads and into the dark hole at the top of the hive.

Anne felt tears on her cheeks as she saw that finally the limbs themselves were separated from the torso, and all were marched back to the volcano-like hole in the top.

They vanished inside, one after the other. The torso was worked on a little longer, until it was opened, and the organs removed, then she gritted her teeth in revulsion as the ribs were separated and with a popping sound each was pulled out. The backbone was then torn out, and then the flesh and skin was fragmented to make it all more portable.

The last piece was the skull which from an eight-foot-tall human being was far too large to fit in the hole. The ants swarmed over it, emptying it of its contents, and removing the outer layers of skin and hair, plus taking the lower jaw.

The red, scraped-looking skull turned slowly, finally being discarded after it was stripped of all its meat and it rolled down the slope of the ant hill to rest on its side, its sightless eyes staring back at her, and making it impossible to recognize it as the man who had lived within it only minutes before.

Brunor shook her a little and looked down at her. “The *morwi* are always hungry, always waiting. Do as you are told, or you will find yourself in the pit.” He grinned. “Tomorrow night you will have a new husband.”

The huge warrior then pushed her toward Goyner who grabbed the back of her hair and guided her back to the meat room.

This time when she was pushed inside, the gross Viking gave her a slap on the side of her face that made her ear ring. He obviously didn’t like being made a fool of. He growled some sort of curse and slammed

the door, locking it.

Anne felt both ill and depressed. She was back where she started except now, she would be watched. She walked back to the door and stared out through the cracks.

The next of her clan's warriors was walked to the edge of the *morwi* pit. Once again, the betting started up.

Anne turned away. This time she couldn't watch.

Troy sat staring into the darkness. The night was cold, they couldn't have a fire, and the night seemed to go on forever.

Yrsa had posted lookouts at each quadrant of their encampment and all the male warriors plus the bow-women slept with their weapons at hand.

He turned his head when he heard someone approaching him. It was Yrsa and she stopped to look down at him. Around her shoulders she had a large dark feather shawl for warmth.

He nodded to her. "I'm okay," he said, and she sat across from him and stretched out a leg to place one of her feet on top of his.

"You worry about your Anne," she said.

He smiled. "She's not *my* Anne. But I worry about her, yes," he replied.

This was a satisfactory answer for Yrsa. She continued to rub his foot with hers, and then stopped. "Troyson," she said softly. "You must prepare yourself. The Aegir are a brutal clan."

He looked up, knowing what she meant.

"We will try and save them, but we might be in time only for vengeance," she replied with a hint of steel in her voice.

Troy stared down at his feet, feeling his own anger burn in his chest. "Then vengeance we will have."

"You should get some rest," she said.

"You too," he sighed. "We have a tough climb tomorrow. And then we must be ready to fight."

She came closer, sat next to him, and lifted one arm with the feathered shawl and draped it around him, pulling him in tight to her. He was bigger now, but she still rested her head on top of his. She kissed the top of his head and brought her lips close to his ear.

"If I die tomorrow, I will be lifted by the Valkyries, and I will be happy. But I will not cross the rainbow bridge, not yet, because I will wait for you." She lay down, taking him with her.

In minutes more he heard her breathing slow as she drifted off to sleep.

Troy's mind wouldn't release him just yet. He wondered what he would do if Anne was already dead. Would he still try and return home? After all, he might have been determined to return because he

had promised her he would get her home. And he kept his promises.

The night was cool, but he felt the warmth of Yrsa radiating through her. He breathed in her smell of berries, perspiration, and leather, and it comforted him. It felt good, and right.

He soon relaxed and followed her into sleep.

CHAPTER 23

Norway, various parts of the coast and interior

The newly hatched dragons grew quickly on the abundant prey animals that didn't realize what they were or knew of their predatory skills. Perhaps being in sunshine made a difference as well, and the creatures spent hours absorbing its rays.

In the first week they were the size of dogs. In two weeks, the size of horses, and now months later they knocked over trees and on occasion invaded farmland consuming entire herds of cows, horses, or pigs.

The other two dragons who had come ashore a year ago were also emerging from a hibernation, and they were now like titanic land leviathans as they broke free from their underground lairs. Lairs that were now full of eggs.

But there was something else.

One of the young dragons that lay basking in the sunshine began to go into convulsions. It jerked and thrashed about, and then its back split open and in another minute mucous-coated membranous wings unfolded to dry in the sunshine.

All across the country more than twenty of the smaller creatures also split open, and wings lifted from their backs. The first of them tested its new limbs, flapping them, waiting for them to fill with blood and gain strength.

Soon it, and all of them, would be airborne.

CHAPTER 24

The land of the Aegir clan, Lemuria

Yrsa shook him. "Dawn comes."

He blinked open sticky eyes. He had been dreaming about dragon headed boats, and jade eyes that would point the way home. And for some reason thinking about going 'home' filled him with fear.

Troy came fully awake. "Let's do this." He got to his feet.

The warriors were already up and talking in whispers amongst each other. Also, the women were securing their bows and long arrows tightly to their bodies with ropes in preparation for the climb.

The group left their camp and headed to the rock face. It was that morning time when the jungle was deathly silent as the night hunters handed over to the day predators and for a brief period everything seemed to give the other some space, some quiet, and perhaps some rest.

In minutes more they were all standing below a sheer cliff leading up into darkness. Troy walked along the base looking for jutting rocks, crevices, and vertical cracks they could use in their climb.

Troy had rock climbed before but had only done free climbing once. Usually, it was with ropes, expandable braces, and the best shoes, gloves, and equipment money could buy. Now he was about to do it while fatigued, and with nothing but his bare hands – he sucked in a deep breath – because this time there was more at stake.

As the dawn light lifted the atmosphere from pitch black to a hint of a silvery glow, he found what he was looking for – the rock face was almost sheer for the first forty feet, but then there was a seam running upwards for another thirty, and broken rocks after that – in effect, the climb should get easier the higher they went.

"This way; follow me up."

Troy had pushed his sword and equipment onto his back. The huge warriors and bow-women did the same. He didn't underestimate the climb while carrying the dead weight of the weaponry, but there was no choice.

He would have liked to hammer in steel spikes, but the sound of steel on steel would ring through the forest and reverberate along the rock's face itself for half a mile – suicidal when planning a surprise attack.

He leapt up to grab the first tiny lip of stone, with his fingertips just gripping on. There was nothing for his feet to hang onto, so he just had to use his arms to pull himself up to the next one. And the next. And so on.

He had to repeat this for the first and hardest part of the climb, and before he was even thirty feet up, he could feel the rivulets of perspiration on his back and also running along his scalp to drip down into his eyes. And that was tough because when it got to his eyes, he couldn't even wipe them away, but just leaned into the rocks and tried to let the cool stone soak it off.

Troy finally made it to a larger lip of stone, and there were just half a dozen feet until a foot-wide crevice, and he chanced a look over his shoulder – he saw Yrsa coming up strongly behind him, and the other warriors following, hand over hand.

One had fallen, but it had only been for twenty to twenty-five feet and he landed with a thump. He immediately got up and began the climb again.

Reaching into the crevice now, Troy could finally use his hands and feet and wedge himself in to rest, and the reduced strain on his hands, wrists and shoulders was welcome.

At sixty feet up he was still well below the tree canopy of the forest, and he hoped still masked from above in the event any of the rival clan members happened to be watching. He also hoped that the little light they had was enough to allow them to see what they were doing, but not enough to reveal their presence.

Troy was also impressed by how quiet the huge Viking warriors were. For all their brutish strength, they could be agile and disciplined when they needed to be.

In another thirty minutes, Troy heard the forest waking up, and animals beginning to call, scream, and hoot. And then in moments more he finally got to the broken rocks with just around twenty feet to the lip at the summit. He glanced left and right, and then above and saw no movement.

He went back to climbing as a shadow passed over him, and a gust of a breeze lifted his hair. He could guess what it was, as he could just make out the flap of leathery wings, and he froze.

Not now, he begged.

The shadow came back, and this time forced Troy to hug the rock as it came closer. It obviously liked the look of Troy as he was the smallest morsel, and perhaps of a size that it could pluck off and fly away with.

Troy could sense it before it struck, and he held on tight as there came a thump against him and the rocks and he felt claws rake his back and arms but failed to get a good grip. He glanced to his side as the thing flapped away, and saw it was much bigger than the undertaker species he had experienced before and this one was easily the size of a small plane.

Anne had told him they weren't dinosaurs, but flying reptiles, and

some species got as tall as giraffes and when these creatures were first found as fossils, they dubbed them flying dragons.

“Dragons can’t fly,” he shouted.

This one wasn’t giraffe-sized, but it was still a flying monster, and if it managed to get a good grip on him, it would easily be able to pull him from the wall.

As he hung there, he turned to see the massive form gliding in again. He couldn’t tear his eyes away from it. But this time while he had been bracing himself and not moving, Yrsa had been clambering up, and when she was beside him, she hung on with one arm, drew her axe, timed the swing, and then connected in a bone-severing chop, that cleaved the monster in two.

The flying reptile’s two halves fell to earth, its eyes wide; less in pain and more in shock, he bet.

Yrsa hung her axe over her shoulder again. “I killed it,” she said redundantly.

“You did.” He turned to her and grinned. “My guardian angel.”

“Angel?” Her brows knitted a little.

“My, *ah*, guardian Valkyrie,” he corrected.

She smiled back. “Always.”

He looked up. “Nearly there.” He began to climb again.

In minutes more he reached the top and paused as he slowly lifted his head above the rock lip. He turned to look one way and then the other – there was nothing moving, and he came up and over to stand on the rock ledge that was only about forty feet wide in each direction, before it shattered into broken jagged stone.

It meant they wouldn’t be able to move along the summit very far and would need to scale down on the Aegir clan side from here.

Yrsa came over next and crouched. Troy let his eyes move over the jungle below but saw nothing.

He pointed. “The gate is about half a mile that way. I’m assuming the Aegir village is not far away from that.”

“We climb down here. And we prepare,” she said as she encouraged her people to climb faster now.

The scale down was faster and easier than the way up, and soon they were assembled on the ground. Yrsa sent scouts ahead, two of their most silent and swift, and they moved a little into the forest and away from the cliff wall.

Troy knew it all came down to this now. This was where they either won or were defeated, because if they got beaten back, they were trapped in the lands of the Aegir people, and there’d be no rapid scaling back out. They won today or they died. There was nothing in-between.

He sucked in a deep breath. He'd been involved in compound takedowns before – groups of extremists out in the middle of deserts, or in forest hideaways, or even in caves, and they were armed to the teeth. They needed to be taken down quietly and quickly. And once again surprise was the key, if it could be achieved, because they usually had ambush areas prepared.

In minutes more the scouts came back, and Troy called the group in to a stretch of open dirt. He handed one of them a stick and requested he draw the camp.

Together the pair of scouts swapped their knowledge, and an image of the camp took shape in the dirt. It was bigger than their own clan size and would have more warriors. Many more.

Troy knew they didn't have much time as now was the optimal period to attack when many of them were still sleeping. The scouts also shared that there was a central arena and even though it was early, there were several guards on watch, probably because the remaining captives were tied out in the open.

Yrsa knew that twenty had been taken, but the scouts reported only about ten remained. She bared her teeth and they ground in her cheeks from pure fury.

"And Anne? The small woman," Troy asked.

"Could not see her," both scouts reported.

Troy took the stick and laid out his battle plan. The first thing they needed to do was kill the guards, quickly and quietly. The bow-women would be used there.

Then, free the captives. That would swell their ranks with much needed fighters. Plus they needed to locate and extract the children.

"And then we set fires and attack the gate," one of their warriors said. "We force it open, and leave."

Now comes the hard part, Troy thought.

"No," he said. "Then we look for Anne."

The warriors glanced at each other. None regarded this as a priority, especially as she was not seen as a true clan member.

"We will find Troy's woman," Yrsa said, and looked along their faces, checking for any challenge. "He is prepared to fight with us, and if it comes, cross the bridge to Valhalla with us."

The clan slowly nodded heads. Or at least most of them did.

Troy just hoped they found her quickly. It also meant every hut they needed to look in would undoubtedly rouse more of the Aegir. And that meant the occupants would need to be subdued or killed.

And in a worst case, the entire village could be awoken, and then that might mean all-out war and probably their deaths.

"Thank you," Troy said, as they faced him. "Remember what they did to our people. If need be, we kill them all." He looked to the bow-

women. "Do not save your arrows. If an enemy appears, then you fire on them."

He quickly drew an outline of a human body in the dirt, and pointed with his stick, firstly to the neck, then the groin, and the stomach. "These are good places for arrows. The skin is soft, and penetration will be good."

The women nodded as they watched. Troy looked up at them. "But an arrow anywhere will slow them down." He stood, dropped the drawing stick, and turned to Yrsa. "We're ready."

Yrsa held up an arm. "*Valhalla!*"

She then led them out, running swiftly and silently through the jungle in at the forest line. It didn't take them long to see the village fires through the trees and they slowed.

The group was about two hundred feet from the first of the clearings for the village. There were a few men with the huge lance-type spears ambling around but everywhere else seemed deserted as the clan slept.

There were several fenced off areas and one was acting like a corral with men sleeping on the ground – the captured clan members, Troy assumed.

He turned to the six women, and pointed to two areas where they would be close but have clear shots over the compound. The eldest, Adrina, was the best shot. He made her their group leader and told her to count to one hundred, and then launch their attack.

He sent them off, and then turned to the warriors crowded in behind them. "When the arrows fly, we break into two teams. The first will head to the Aegir clan who were hit with arrows and make sure they do not cry out."

"Kill them?" one of the warriors asked.

Troy nodded. "They must not be allowed to warn the clan. Take all their weapons. Pull out the arrows and bring them back; they will be needed." He then faced the other team. "You men will then free our people. Bring them back here, give them water, and the captured weapons, and tell them to be ready to fight."

"Then you must find your friend," Yrsa said.

Troy nodded and looked back at the camp. It was bigger than he expected. Searching each hut would take them hours, and the day would be fully upon them by then.

He turned to her. "The arrows will fly soon. We must be ready. Remember, free your warriors first; we need them."

The group crept closer, and Troy assumed on the count of one hundred, sure enough the soft sound of bow strings twanged, and large arrows travelled across the compound to strike the bellies, necks, and groins of the guards.

Even before they fell, Yrsa's warriors sprinted out and used their spears to finish off the wounded men. Not one had the chance to cry out. The bodies were dragged away and thrown into the brush where the bow-women pulled their arrows free.

In seconds more and with the bow-women keeping watch, all the captives were released, and led back into the jungle. They were exuberant, but tired, hungry, and thirsty, and only a few had wounds.

They were quickly given food and water, and the tales they told of their torture set a grim tone in the group.

Troy could see in their faces, that even though tired, given a chance to fight, they would now do so to the death, as none would allow themselves to be taken captive again.

"The children are still in there somewhere," one of the captives said.

Troy turned; the light of day was coming. Soon the entire clan would rouse. He knew a cabin-to-cabin search was beyond them. He had no choice; he needed to evolve his plans.

"Burn them," he said. "Set fire to the huts. Bring the people out. In the chaos, we attack."

"There are many of them," one of the captive warriors said.

"They will be surprised and unready," Troy replied. "We take down the biggest of them first." He looked at each man. "Every one of you is worth two of them. Be swift, be deadly."

Yrsa beamed at him with pride, delighting in his bloodthirsty rhetoric.

"We will search the huts," she said to Troy, "while my warriors lay chaos and fear." She made a fist. "They killed many of our people. Now we will show them what fear really is."

Troy got to his feet. "Be as silent for as long as you can." He pointed. "The burning torches. Take them. Use them." He turned, knowing a good attack made use of snipers. "Bow-women, hide yourselves, and shoot any warriors that are clan Aegir."

"Go!" Yrsa ordered, and the bow-women and warriors sprang out to sprint to their allotted attack places.

It didn't take long for the huts, with wood and straw piled outside, to take light. Small fires turned into larger fires and then the yelling, screaming, and chaos began.

Large, near-naked men burst from some and were immediately pierced with arrows. The yelling soon brought forth others from further out, and many of these had the forethought to bring weapons.

Then, the battle began in earnest, with the thirty-two of Yrsa's warriors against around seventy of the Aegir clan.

But they had surprise on their side, plus the secreted bow-women. And they had fury and revenge burning in their bellies and fought like demons.

Troy and Yrsa moved in the shadows, checking in the huts, looking in the storage sheds, meat lockers, and anywhere else in their search for the women and children, and Anne, but not finding any of them.

Troy quickly became frustrated, and pushed down the thoughts that Anne might already be dead.

From time-to-time Yrsa glanced at him, and he knew she was wondering how much longer they would give it but wouldn't say it out of loyalty to him.

He glanced back to see the piles of the Aegir clan dead, and very few of their own warriors had yet succumbed. A seed of hope began to bloom in his chest. If they could just find their hidden people.

But from the end of the village, where the larger huts were, there was a voice yelling, organizing, and soon, the remaining Aegir warriors gathered there, and didn't rush into battle but were being formed up.

Troy knew whoever was there, was their leader, and sure enough a group came forward, this one with shields that they used against the arrows.

By now the numbers of the Aegir had been whittled down to have comparable odds to the Fjall clan, and it became a standoff between two opposing and equally matched forces. Troy still felt they would win the day as blood-hot revenge was a powerful drug.

Then an older clan chieftain raised his voice. "Fjall clan," he yelled. "Do not die here this day." He waited. "I call to speak to your leader."

"*Ach*," Yrsa exhaled through her nose. "I am bound to talk."

Troy nodded, knowing that Viking honor demanded it. But every second they waited, the Aegir would get stronger and better organized. He didn't like it but had no choice but to watch and try and adapt their battle plans.

Yrsa stood, gripping her axe and shield. She walked back to where her own warriors had gathered, their own weapons and shields dripping blood and gore. She went and stood at their front.

The older clan leader then came forward but remained behind a line of shields. "Ah, the daughter of Skarde is now clan chieftain. Good." He smirked and nodded. "You have brave warriors. Will they all die here today? Or will they join us? And live."

"And you are Vigorm, the old man who snuck into our village to attack us. And killed my father." Yrsa's face was furious. "A glorious death is all we could wish for." Yrsa stood with legs planted and her battle axe held in one hand. "And I will make sure your death is not glorious. But painful."

She reached out behind her, and one of her warriors put a round shield into her hand. She was ready.

Vigorm then looked at Troy. "And you have found another little

person,” he chuckled. “Next you will bring your children to fight.” His face grew serious. “Oh, yes, we have them now.”

He stared for a moment and then grunted as his mouth turned down. “We have lost many warriors. And you have lost many warriors.” The old chieftain scratched his chin, and then faced Yrsa. “I will make you a pact. Your champion against mine. If Aegir clan’s champion wins, your warriors, women, and children join our clan. We need their strong blood.”

Vigorm held out a hand. “If yours wins, you can leave with your people, your women and children, supplies and a promise that we will be clan cousins forever.”

Yrsa seemed to think it over. She glanced at her warriors, men, and the women. They were all prepared to fight to the death. But she probably knew that if they were massacred here today, then the remaining people at the village would end as slaves. Or food for the arena.

She then glanced at Troy, and her lips curved just a hint before she turned back.

“I accept your pact,” she said. “Bring forth your champion.”

Vigorm half turned. “Brunor.”

The crowd parted and the man came forward. Troy’s mouth dropped open at the size of the man – nearly nine feet tall, hulking shoulders, and arms like tree trunks. As he came to the front, he dragged something with him, and when Troy saw what it was his eyes near bulged.

In his hand he held a leash, and Anne was on the end of it. One of her eyes was swollen closed, and it looked like her nose was broken and was crusted with blood. She tried to raise a weak smile at seeing Troy, but her lips didn’t work properly.

“Your champion?” Vigorm asked with a hint of amusement in his voice.

Troy went to step forward, but Yrsa turned to him and shook her head. “No. This, I must do.” She turned back and then stepped a pace closer.

Even though she stood a foot smaller than the giant, she banged her axe head against her shield. “I stand ready.”

Brunor handed Anne’s leash over to one of the other warriors as if he was asking for someone to mind his dog. He then drew a sword that must have been five feet in length and a foot wide near the hilt. It looked heavy, and Troy doubted the blade was all that sharp as it had notches in it, where it had obviously come up against another edged weapon. It told Troy he had battled before, and probably many times.

Troy was just behind Yrsa, and he leaned forward. “He’s big, but he will tire quickly. Make him work.”

Yrsa half turned and nodded. But Troy saw her face was pale.

Brunor was handed a huge shield, and he stepped out, so Troy saw his full size for the first time. He felt his heart sink at Yrsa's chances. He wanted to rush out and stand by Yrsa, but it would have been an insult to her, and to both clans.

From what Troy knew about the Viking clan honor, unless he was invited to fight, or there was some sort of obvious dirty tactic, then he was bound to do nothing but watch.

"Begin," Vigorm said.

Brunor grinned as he also banged his shield. A confident smile lifted his thick black beard, and he and Yrsa circled each other.

He always thought of Yrsa as big and powerful, but compared to this ogre she seemed a child.

Brunor swung his sword and Yrsa leapt back out of the way of its reach and darted in with a powerful swing of her heavy axe. It clanged against the rivets on Brunor's shield and he shrugged it off as if it was nothing.

Brunor slashed out in a backward stroke, and then brought the huge sword around in an angled chop. Yrsa pulled back and the sword thumped into the ground so hard Troy felt it through the soles of his feet.

Yrsa pirouetted, danced, and ducked, and though she was hopelessly outmatched on strength, she was by far the faster combatant on the field and managed to dodge each of his attempted strikes.

Troy suddenly thought that just maybe if the big oaf kept swinging and missing his huge body would tire, or Yrsa would land a lucky hit and hobble the giant.

But the thing about big beasts was that even though they tired quickly, before then they were capable of short bursts of great strength, and lightning speed.

And that was when Brunor connected. His blade swung down in a feint, but then immediately brought the blade back at her frighteningly fast and at a low angle. Yrsa just got her shield down in time, but the wood splintered, and she was knocked off balance by the blow.

She discarded the broken shield and held her axe in both hands, using it for defense and offense. Unfortunately for her, Brunor was a capable and experienced fighter and as yet had shown no sign of tiring.

Without her shield, Yrsa had to try and strike, and also defend against the huge sword. And soon the wooden handle of her axe, though bound in some sort of tough leather-like material, was being chipped as she held it up to absorb the blows.

Brunor brought the sword down on top of her in a titanic blow, and Yrsa held up the axe two-handed to block it. And the handle on her axe broke allowing the blade through where it continued on to chop into her leather armor and on into trapezium muscle. It wasn't deep, but it would have been painful, and blood spurted.

Yrsa grit her teeth, but Troy knew she must have been in agony. And slightly debilitated. She got to her feet, just holding the axe handle and in the few seconds of her being off balance, Brunor pressed his attack. He used the hilt of his sword to smash into her temple. And that was it.

Yrsa staggered, and Troy saw her eyes were unfocussed.

"Yrsa!" he yelled and went to run forward, but one of his own warriors held him, and shook his head.

"You cannot, Troyson. What will be, will be," he said somberly.

Troy and the clan could only watch. Troy expected the giant to finish her – perhaps with a single stroke removing her head, or even cutting her completely in half, but he instead hit her again and Yrsa went down flat out.

While the Aegir clan cheered, Brunor kicked Yrsa's broken axe away and roared with laughter. He then jammed his huge sword into the ground and bent and lifted Yrsa by her braided hair.

Troy felt physical pain seeing her treated like that, and watched with bared teeth as the man shook her and held her out in front of her clan.

"This is your chieftain?" he roared. "This child?"

Yrsa looked barely conscious. And Troy was thankful she was nearly out, as she would have continued to fight and then be cut down. But he doubted the brute had any mercy in him, and with Yrsa, and their clan losing, he doubted he'd be one of the warriors integrated into their tribe. More likely they'd eat him or use him for sport. And Anne would fare no better. Troy made a plan that if Yrsa was killed, he would attack the giant anyway. He had nothing to lose and was probably as good as dead anyway.

"I would not waste my blade on this child," he sneered as his eyes were on Troy and her clan.

Troy relaxed a little, thinking he planned to spare her. But instead, he threw her with all his strength, and she careened into the fencing around the strange pit, smashing down some of the stakes.

She lay there groaning, and Troy felt the tears of rage coming as he strained against the warriors who held him back.

Brunor followed her and lifted her again by the hair and dragged her and then held her up at the edge of a large pit. He turned to grin at them.

What the hell is in there? he wondered.

Yrsa just moaned, her eyes rolled back, and arms hung limply at her sides.

Troy looked to Anne, a question on his face.

She just shook her head. *Ants*, she mouthed.

Ants? He wondered if that was what she really said. He looked back at Brunor as the brute held Yrsa higher and looked into her face.

His lips curled into a cruel sneer. "Let the *morwi* have your worthless hide."

He threw her into the pit, and then turned to lumber back to the crowd, holding his enormous arms wide.

"Are there any others?" He grinned confidently. "Any champions who do not submit to the Aegir clan rule?"

Troy had nothing to lose. With Yrsa defeated they were bound to either be absorbed by the new clan or killed. And he knew he and Anne would certainly be on the kill list.

Troy turned to just see the bow-women still hiding at the edge of the jungle. He saw Adrina gently part some fronds to lock eyes with him and he nodded to her. She nodded in return, and he hoped she knew what he wanted – *be ready*. He then turned back to the giant.

"*I do!*" he yelled.

His own clan member immediately released him, but many took turns to quickly lean in and give him battle advice about how to attack and where to strike the giant. Perhaps many of them wanted to challenge but were not yet ready to cross the rainbow bridge to Valhalla.

Brunor frowned, trying to determine where the voice had come from as Troy stepped forward. On spotting him, the giant threw his head back and his laughter was like a roar.

Brunor's clan joined in on the mirth, and the old chieftain clapped his hands for silence. He then fixed his rheumy eyes on Troy, and then shared a condescending smile with him. "Your challenge is accepted."

Troy stepped out, and Brunor stayed where he was, huge legs rooted and only a few feet from the pit where he had thrown Yrsa. And it was where Troy wanted him.

He'd have one chance. One chance against the giant, and one chance to rescue Yrsa if she was still alive. And yet he had no idea what exactly was in the pit, other than Anne inferring it was ants. He didn't want to think too deeply on what exactly that meant on this strange, primordial island.

The ancient Vigorm came to stand close to Brunor and called Troy closer. He was obviously enjoying himself and wanted a front row seat for what he assumed was going to be a slaughter.

Troy had a lot of experience in hand-to-hand combat, and many times he had been called upon to fight-or-die. He knew he could take

one of the big guys out – he'd done it before. But Brunor was big, young, and experienced. He saw the way he had easily beaten Yrsa, and knew he was not a man to be underestimated.

He looked the giant over – there were few weaknesses he could see. Plus, as he had just watched him fight, and saw his youth had meant he didn't tire. Troy knew he also needed to get in that pit as whatever was down there would begin to, or already be, attacking Yrsa.

Brunor lowered his brow as Troy approached and the big man's disdainful smirk never left his face. He lifted his huge sword and waited.

Troy knew a sword fight with the giant would be suicidal and needed to adapt his tactics. He began to run, and when just two dozen feet from the man-mountain, he pulled his bow from over his shoulder and nocked an arrow.

Brunor looked down at the pitifully small weapon and laughed. He drew back his arm in preparation of his first blow.

But Troy fired. And the arrow travelled fast and the aim was true – it went straight into Brunor's left eye socket.

The giant's hand went to his face as he howled loud enough to create an echo over the entire village. Around them from the gathered groups, there were gasps of astonishment from the Aegir, and whoops of delight and laughter from the Fjall.

Troy didn't slow, but as the huge man was reaching up to tug the arrow from his eye socket, Troy lowered his shoulder and struck him mid center. His entire body weight and mass wasn't enough to knock Brunor down, but he never expected that to happen.

He just wanted to knock him backwards a few steps. Which is what happened.

Brunor staggered back a step, two, then three, and then suddenly his arms pinwheeled, momentarily forgetting the arrow embedded in his eye, as his back foot was now over nothing. He tumbled backwards and then vanished. From down in that pit, he landed with a heavy *thump*.

Troy quickly notched another arrow and swung around, this time pointing it at the decrepit chieftain. "More the merrier." He nodded to the pit. "Your turn."

"No!" The chieftain turned to his clan.

But before he could even open his mouth, Troy had loosed an arrow, piercing his throat. The chieftain gulped a few times and then gagged as his eyes bulged.

Behind him both clans howled, and the fighting resumed. Troy could hear the clash of steel bone, and muscle, and also the twang of bow strings and the fleshy *whump* of arrows striking bodies.

In the chaos, Troy strode to the chieftain, grabbed him by the

shoulder and led him to the pit. "In. You. Go." And then pushed hard. The man also went into the pit.

He ignored all of it and walked to the edge of the pit and looked in. He immediately spotted the just rousing form of Yrsa, and the chieftain and Brunor, slowly struggling to their feet.

But he saw nothing inside the pit other than the three people, and a huge mound with a hole in its top.

He didn't hesitate and jumped the twenty feet down to the soft sand at the bottom.

Troy landed, rolled, and came back to his feet. Brunor the giant was staggering around and collided with the huge mound in the center but stopped his movement to pull on the arrow.

He roared his pain as it came free with the eyeball perfectly skewered on the end like some sort of bloody delicacy ready for the barbecue.

The chieftain scrambled at the wall, making soft, wet sounds in a throat still pierced with an arrow.

Troy ignored both of them and ran to Yrsa.

"I'm here," he said and helped her sit up. He tore a strip of cloth from his tunic and used it to wipe the blood from her face and clear her eyes. Then he wadded it and fitted it under her armor over the wound in her shoulder.

She groaned and looked up at him. "I lost."

"You're alive." He smiled. "And that is more important to me than a hundred wins or losses. But the fight goes on. And your people need you to lead them." He pushed her hair back off her face. "Can you stand?" he asked.

"I think so," she said and placed a hand on his shoulder.

"Wait," Troy said.

He heard something, and a stinging citric odor filled the pit. He turned at the sound of a soft and furious clicking. But suddenly the huge form of Brunor loomed over him, and a fist as large as a Christmas ham swung at the side of his head.

The man was probably as powerful as a bull elephant, but the advantage Troy had was he was faster. And well trained. And he ducked, also pulling Yrsa out of the way.

The blow just caught the back of his head and felt like a sledgehammer, and he was sure he'd have an egg there as big as his fist tomorrow, but for the most part he had avoided the killer impact.

Troy kept moving, and rolled onto his back, coming around with his bow in his hand and already with an arrow at the ready.

He aimed, fired, and watched, as the arrow buried itself into Brunor's other eye socket, now fully blinding the giant.

The man's howls of pain and fury filled the pit, and the massive human staggered backwards. But that wasn't what had caught Troy's attention now.

"Oh-*hhh* shit," he whispered.

He grabbed at Yrsa. "*Get up, get up, get up.*" He dragged her to her feet.

Behind them the mound that was now partially crumbled from Brunor stumbling into it, was erupting with dozens, hundreds, thousands, of angry looking red ants as big as puppies. But there was no soft wet noses and doe-like eyes, but instead fiery heads and pincers held wide, antenna twitching robotically, and glassine, black eyes that searched for the source of the attack on the hive.

The chieftain finally paused his calling to his clan above them and scrabbling at the pit wall, to turn. His eyes went wide and he gave a strangled shriek and turned back to scrabble even harder as he tried to climb the crumbling wall.

The blinded giant, Brunor, was the first one of them reached and the ants swarmed up his trunk-like legs. Even blinded he knew what they were and swiped down massive hands to knock them from his thighs, but for every single one he dislodged, half a dozen more found him.

He started to blunder about, but without eyes, he simply banged into walls, and then crashed into the central mound again, eliciting an even more furious response from the insects.

Yrsa shook her head to clear it and wiped sticky blood from her nose. Troy looked into her face.

"We gotta get out of here." He lifted her.

"I can do it," she said and backed away from the swarming ants.

Across from them, Brunor screamed in agony – the ants had covered him so completely it was hard to make out his flesh beneath their hard, jostling bodies.

And then as if a central command had been given, they stopped their movements over him. Then stung all at once, as his body went rigid, and he fell to the ground and shuddered as if receiving a thousand volts.

Then another command must have been given as the ants resumed their furious and frantic movements again – this time not concerned with covering him, but instead setting to work on taking the big man apart.

"Hell no." Troy was horrified. "That is *not* happening to us."

Troy looked around for a way out, but the walls were too high even for Yrsa to reach the rim. They needed someone up there to help them. Or a ladder.

And then he saw one.

“Can you jump?” he asked.

The ants reached them.

“I will jump out of *here*, Troyson. I can promise you that,” she said, as she backed up.

“We have one chance.” He stepped away from her. “When I say, run with all your strength, and use the ladder I make for you.”

Troy ran across the pit, picking up ants on his legs even though he moved quickly. He came to a stop behind the chieftain who continued to bend forward to scrabble at the wall, almost as if he was trying to burrow his way into it.

Without a word, Troy went down on all fours behind the man, turned to Yrsa, and nodded.

At first, she didn’t understand, but then got it. She nodded, put her head down, and ran at them.

She crossed the pit in a few seconds, gathering speed. Troy braced himself, as the three-hundred-pound woman’s foot pounded down on his back, as she leapt up to her next step, the chieftain.

Her foot came down on his shoulder, and as the impact slightly weighed him down, she sprung from him up to grab the edge of the pit and hold on. She then pulled herself up but left her legs hanging down.

Troy got to his feet and tried to punch the several dozen ants from him, but they used their spiny feet to cling on tight and refused to be dislodged. He knew if they all turned on their stings, he’d go into shock.

He had seconds to spare and clambered up Vigorm’s back. “Thanks, Chief.”

And he leapt up to grab Yrsa’s ankles as she hauled herself upwards.

But then they both stopped as the chieftain grabbed one of Troy’s ankles.

Yrsa slid backwards, showering them in dirt and Troy felt his fingers slip on her bare, perspiration-slicked legs.

By now the ants had begun to swarm up the chieftain’s body, reaching Troy, and eventually climbing up his arms. He bet he knew what they were doing – cover all three of them, then coordinate their killer group sting, and claim all three prizes.

Troy gritted his teeth and Yrsa screamed her frustration. She was slipping and soon her clinging hands would come back over the edge. The ants would cover them, and in minutes more they’d all be being cut up and dragged into the hole at the top of the hive.

He looked up, seeing the muscles in her shoulders bulging from the strain, and her shoulder began to bleed again. He knew what he needed to do – the clan needed a chieftain, and certainly did not need a runt-of-the-litter warrior.

“Fuck it.”

He let go.

Yrsa screamed as Troy and the older chieftain fell back to the dirt.

Troy was immediately on his feet and began to sprint around the outside of the pit, trying to use speed to slow down the ants climbing on him.

The chieftain wailed as he began to get covered.

Troy had zero sympathy for him as he'd probably been condemning slaves, prisoners, and anyone else who pissed him off, to this sort of death for years.

As Troy sprinted by the chieftain he slapped the man on the shoulder. “*Eat it, asshole,*” he yelled, in between puffing hard.

Troy laughed with little mirth. He couldn't keep this up, and the bottom of the pit was now a floor of moving red bodies. His feet crunched down on them without breaking them, as he already knew that ants were one of nature's toughest insects.

He passed by the covered chieftain again, but Vigorm was now just a silent mound of moving insectoid legs, bodies, and waving antenna. He knew beneath that furious pile of exoskeletons the man was being dissected, bit by bit, scrap of skin by scrap of skin.

He shivered, feeling sick. He did not want to go that way. But he began to slow, puffing hard and sweating furiously. And every step he took, more of the ants managed to cling onto him.

Just as he was wondering if they would hold off until enough of them clung to him before they all stung at once, one of his calves suddenly felt as if a red-hot needle had stabbed his flesh. And the pain spread as more venom was injected into the flesh.

His leg began to feel a little rubbery. And it slowed him down.

“No,” he pleaded.

Just then a bucketload of a black fluid was thrown into the pit. Then another and another. It covered the ant hill, and many of the furious bodies, still dismantling the final remains of Brunor and the chieftain.

The ants went crazy, perhaps knowing what it would mean, and then the liquid was followed by a burning torch that ignited the liquid with a ferocious *whump*, and filled the pit with a blazing heat that made Troy throw a hand up as his skin began to redden.

What new torture is this? he wondered.

Just then a rope came down over the lip, and Yrsa lay down at the top of it.

“Grab it, Troyson, quickly,” she beseeched.

He did, wrapping it around one arm, but keeping the other free to try and bat at the ants still clinging to his legs.

Another stung, and then another. Perhaps it was retaliation for the

fire, and the pain was now so intense he felt light headed. And his hand began to involuntarily relax on the rope.

Just as he began to slide, a large brown hand grabbed his wrist. He was pulled roughly over the lip of the pit, carried to a large trough of water, and dumped in.

The ants immediately released him and came to the surface, where they were scooped out by Fjall warriors, and smashed flat with the side of their axes.

He lay in the water, feeling the blessed coolness as a balm against the fiery stings.

Anne came and leaned in, quickly checking him over, lifting his eyelids, and looking at the bites. She came back to hold his face and smiled into it.

“You have more lives than a cat, Mr. Troyson Strom.”

Troy gave her a pained smile and sat up. He then held up an arm, looking at the huge welts coming up. He could feel them all over his body.

“Thought I was a goner,” he said. He looked around, planning to get out of the tub. “What happened up here?”

“Take it easy.” She put a hand on his shoulder. “Yrsa climbed out. The warring clans took it as a sign that she was victorious and killed both that Brunor monster and the old chieftain.”

“Help me up,” he said and held out a shaking hand.

She did this time and he stepped out. He could then see that all of the Aegir clan’s warriors were kneeling and without weapons. His own clan stood over them and had freed all the women and children.

Yrsa stood out in front. One of her eyes was swollen shut, her shoulder had a huge bandage piled on it, and she was covered in abrasions and a few bites, but she stood with legs planted wide and hands on her hips.

Troy walked through the lines of his own warriors who stood aside for him. Yrsa heard him coming and turned.

She held out an arm and smiled. “We won this day.” She placed a hand on his shoulder, and then turned back to the kneeling warriors. “Now I must unite the clans.” She sucked in a deep breath. “Our clans have warred for many generations. But it ends today. Aegir clan will now become Fjall clan, and I will be your chieftain.”

She looked over the upturned faces. “Any who oppose this may stand now.”

One man stood. “Agnar opposes this. Aegir clan rules this land.”

Another man stood. “Ogen opposes this. Aegir clan rules this land.”

A third man stood and repeated the line.

Yrsa grunted, and the entire groups went silent. This was the first test of her leadership and the first challenge.

Yrsa stepped forward to within half a dozen feet of the closest rebel, the first to challenge her, Agnar, and in a single fluid motion drew forth her sword, and in a backward sweep, took the man's head clean off to make it then bounce along the ground.

Blood spurted from his neck and the headless body stood upright for several seconds before crumpling.

She looked up, a deadly smile on her lips. "Agnar did not die in battle so his soul will wander the lands as he will be denied entry to Valhalla." Her eyes narrowed as she looked at the other two standing men. "Who else wishes to wander our lands as a lost spirit?"

One man quickly kneeled. The other, Ogen, remained standing.

"We will not live as slaves," Ogen said, keeping his head down. "The blood of Odin runs in our veins."

"No, you will not," Yrsa replied. "And the blood of Odin runs in *all* our veins." She stared at him. "You have my word as clan chieftain."

Ogen lifted his eyes to Yrsa, staring for several seconds as though trying to see into her soul. Yrsa didn't blink and after another moment he kneeled.

Yrsa held up her axe. "Two clans, one chieftain."

Behind her the Fjall warriors whooped and banged their weapons against their shields.

"Stand," she said to Ogen.

The man slowly came to his feet, his eyes still full of defiance. "What do you want of us?"

"Brunor and Vigorm directed you to our village to attack us, and kill us, and take us as slaves." Her face was grim. "It was Odin's will that they paid for that with their lives." She stepped forward, and the man tensed, perhaps still expecting the sword to flash out again and take his head.

"You are Ogen," she said. "You fought well. Will you serve me now?" she asked, her eyes burning into him.

He lifted his chin. "As a warrior, not as a slave."

"Not just as a warrior, but as my general of the Aegir clan," she announced. "You and some of your warriors will come to our village to learn our ways. When you return here, unharmed, you will be our brothers and sisters in arms. If you need us, we will come at your call. And if we need you, we will expect the same. Do you accept?"

The man's brow furrowed, as if expecting some sort of trick. "That is all?"

She nodded. "There are other clans. Maybe one day we can unite them all. Maybe even one day we can slay the drekka itself."

He went to his knee willingly this time. "Hail Queen Yrsa of the clans."

"Thank God, it's over." Troy said to Anne.

She nodded but walked to the edge of the pit that still had some black smoke billowing from it and looked down. She called Troy over.

"We've never seen or heard of these on the island before. They're like some species of giant fire ant."

"Yeah, and they sting like a bitch. Glad I got out of there," he said, and even though the fires were now burning down, he still saw some pieces of either the old chieftain or Brunor being tugged into the hole at the top of the mound.

"I'm glad they're just confined in here," he said.

"That's just it," she said. "You can forget about dinosaurs, dragons, and giant squid things being dangerous; these are the real threat." She turned to him. "You ever heard of the Christmas Islands red crabs? Been living on the island for perhaps hundreds of thousands or millions of years. Then about fifty years back an invasive species of ants arrived. For all the millions of crabs, and their formidable defenses, the ants overwhelmed them; ate them from inside their own shells. It was a massacre that's still ongoing. They probably won't survive."

He turned to her. "You think that might happen here, on this island if the ants got out?"

"I do." She nodded. "Imagine a colony of ants this big, this aggressive, got out into the wild and established many colonies or one super colony? In half a century, there'd be nothing else living on the island."

"*Holy crap*," Troy said softly.

"Yeah, crap is right," she agreed.

He turned to see Yrsa talking with some of her warriors. She saw him looking at her and beamed back. He called her over.

She strode toward him and immediately grabbed him and looked him over. She showed him her own long brown legs. "They hurt, but we can treat them. I'll call for some ormarot," she announced. "I will put it on."

She then grinned and pulled him closer, ignoring Anne as if she wasn't even there. "You bring me luck." She squeezed his shoulder.

Troy laughed softly. "The ant bites aren't too bad. We were lucky that we didn't suffer many." He looked up at her. "But imagine if those things got out. And took over the jungle. Hives everywhere, and millions of them. They would kill and eat us all. There would be nowhere to hide from them."

Yrsa's eyes narrowed as she turned toward the pit. "Then they must all die here and now."

She turned. "Ogen."

Her newly appointed general came over.

"Where did these abominations come from?" she asked, pointing to

the pit.

He shrugged. "They have always been here. Our clan legend has it, they were here at the dawn of our time. As long as we feed them..." He looked a little guilty, "...then they are content to stay in their hole."

"We will not take the chance that one day they decide they are not content anymore," she replied. "Bring more oil. Lots of oil."

Buckets and buckets were brought forth. When they looked into the pit the ants had all retreated back into their hive to enjoy their latest feast.

Yrsa had ladders dropped down, and the oil was transported into the pit, where this time it was poured directly into the hive. Gallons after gallons were poured in.

It was only after the final buckets that the oil-coated ants exploded outward. The warriors retreated, but from above they continued to load the pit with more and more oil.

"Fire!" Yrsa yelled.

Burning torches were launched into the pit and the explosion of flames rose fifty feet in the air and forced them all backward a dozen paces.

Troy walked forward, holding an arm up over his face and watched. This time the flames raced to the hive and entered. In seconds more the hive was like a volcano as the flames found all the pools of oil in its labyrinths and shot out like a jet engine.

Above the stink of the burning oil, they could smell the acidic citrus smell of the cooking formic acid.

Yrsa also walked forward and folded her arms as she watched. "When it is burned down, I want the pit filled in."

Troy turned to Anne. "Will that do it?"

"It should," Anne replied. "It's not just the fire but filling the chambers below with the oily black smoke should suffocate the queen."

Troy turned back. "I hope so. Because what I know about ants is they are expert diggers, and never tire. If enough of them are alive they'll dig their way out, emerge somewhere else. And if they have the queen or a queen's egg, then they can move on and establish another colony."

Anne shrugged. "If you want to know for sure, you should dig it up. Keep looking until you find the queen. But an ant that size might excavate down a hundred feet."

"Yeah, we don't have time for that. Let's just tell the Aegir clan to stay vigilant." Troy turned back to see Yrsa and her clan getting ready to leave. "Looks like it's time to go."

"You think they'll still help us get to the mountain top?" Anne

asked.

“I think so,” he said. “She owes me one.”

EPISODE 22

Mankind killed the myths and legends. Until the myths and legends killed mankind.

CHAPTER 25

Norway, the Sentralanlegget – buried beneath Kongens Utsikt Mountain

The secure facility shook, raining dust down on the large central table. Annika Solberg, the prime minister, held her hands flat on the tabletop and stared straight ahead as if keeping herself centered.

She knew their facility was designed to be an underground survival shelter and could survive a direct hit from a nuclear missile. It was supposed to be impenetrable. But of course, it had never really been tested. And not against what was attacking them now.

"They've gone airborne," General Mundsén said as he stood before her.

Next to him, standing in silence, were the scientists, Eillen Hjärdan and Eric Vanborg. Both had eyes on their prime minister.

Solberg scoffed softly. "Of course they have." She looked up. "They seem immune to bullets and bombs, and now they can take out our planes in the air. Plus cross our terrain even quicker now. What else?"

"They have an amazing self-repair ability," Mundsén replied. "We can put holes in them the size of barn doors, but they burrow below the ground. And when they emerge, somewhere else, they are fully healed."

"And bigger and stronger." She closed her eyes. "There were twenty-four; twenty-two big, and two very big. How many are remaining?" she asked.

"Remaining? I have received no field reports that we have successfully taken down a single one." The General paced for a moment. "In fact, we think there are even more now. Somehow, they're breeding, or splitting, or more are emerging. We just don't know..."

The prime minister made a disgusted sound in her throat. "General Mundsén, what do we know?"

"We think nucleonics may have an impact." He stood to attention, not looking at her.

She slowly turned her half-lidded gaze on him. "We are *not* dropping nuclear bombs on Norway on my watch." She made a disgusted sound in her throat. "These things come from out of nowhere and overwhelm us so quickly. How can this be?"

"Maybe not from nowhere." Eillen Hjärdan was holding a small laptop computer. "May I, prime minister?"

"If you've got something to add, now is the time to do it," Solberg replied. "Show me."

Hjardan placed her computer on the desk in front of the prime minister and half turned it so they could both see the screen. Eric Vanborg joined her. On it was an image of a partly fossilized jawbone.

Solberg's eyes went to it and her brows knitted. "What am I looking at?"

"The Cretaceous–Paleogene extinction event was a mass extinction of most of the larger animal species on Earth and occurred approximately 66 million years ago. It was in effect the end of the age of reptiles and the beginning of the age of mammals," she began.

Solberg sat motionless, waiting, her eyes going from the screen to the small woman.

This time, Eric Vanborg spoke. "The scientific consensus is that a large asteroid or comet wiped the mega species out."

"I know all this," the prime minister said impatiently.

"I know, I know," Vanborg said hurriedly. "But other scientists have suspected there was more at play. We can all agree that there certainly was a large asteroid impact, because the iridium layer is undisputed. However, many believe that there was some other factor involved. Something physical, something biological, like the existence of a super predator. It existed for millions of years, and gradually wiped out every creature bigger than a medium-sized dog."

She pointed at the screen to a half massive footprint in a recovered fragment of rock matrix that was obviously in some basement museum storeroom.

"The Mahajanga print. Found in the Berivotra region in the province of northern Madagascar in 1968. It is a partial print of an unknown mega species that existed around 64 million years ago..."

Solberg's brows came together. "Wait, 64 million? That's a million years after the asteroid impact that wiped them all out." She pointed. "Are you saying this could be that *other factor* involved? That mega predator that wiped the dinosaurs out?"

Eric Vanborg straightened. "Correct. And after all the remaining food stock had been depleted..."

"Good grief." Solberg sat back.

Eillen Hjardan continued for her colleague. "And then we believe they began to prey on each other."

"And you think they're the same creatures plaguing us now?" Solberg asked wearily.

Hjardan nodded. "This fossilized partial print is the same as the ones that are being left behind by our... dragons."

"Dragons," Solberg scoffed. "I can't believe I'm even hearing that." She looked up at the scientists. "And so, how does that help us?"

The group sat in silence for many minutes.

Solberg put her fingertips to her temples and pressed softly. "It

seems our *dragons* have returned to begin another mass extinction.” She turned to the General. “Have the United Nations responded to our request for assistance?”

“They’ve responded.” The General’s eyes were glazed. “By telling us they have quarantined our country. They do not want this biological infestation to spread. They have enacted strict border controls.”

Solberg seethed. “They’ve left us on our own?”

“Not just us, Prime Minister,” Mundsén replied. “They’ve also walled off the United Kingdom. Seems they have their own infestation.” He straightened. “And no one has heard from them in over twelve hours.”

“And the UN thinks they can contain the problem with border controls?” Solberg’s laugh was like an angry bark. “They don’t know they’ve gone airborne.” She put her head in her hands. “We’re all doomed.”

CHAPTER 26

The Fjall Viking village, Lemuria

True to her word, Yrsa had the balloon finished. Then the huge basket woven, that would be required to take them, plus their spare fuel, and supplies.

Above the basket was a thin stone tray that was positioned at the mouth of the canopy where they could feed burning wood to continually fill the bag with hot air – it would take an entire day to fill, and then they'd need enough wood to continue its travel across the freezing sea to Norway.

In addition, this time they would have clothing made – vests and cloaks, leggings, thick boots, and gloves. They would have supplies of dried meat and water, but hoped they wouldn't be in the air all that long – a single day if they were lucky and had a strong breeze behind them – perhaps two to three if they needed to tack, rising up and down to find complementary thermals that took them in the right direction.

It was three weeks later that Troy announced they were ready. Anne stood back, surveying all the pieces – the balloon bag was huge, and probably weighed five hundred pounds all by itself. It would require several of the strong warriors to haul it up via ropes tied around the bodies, bandolier style.

Then there was the basket, wood, and food and water supplies. All up, they'd need a team of a dozen to complete the scale to the summit inside the hollow mountain.

Anne had her hands on her hips and looked to him with a half-smile. "Believe it or not, I think this was the easy part." She tilted her head. "Now comes the hard part."

"Let's not put it off any longer, or we'll be moving into winter and will freeze halfway across," Troy said. "I'll let Yrsa know we're ready."

Troy walked up the pathway to the biggest hut on the hill overlooking the village. He knocked and pushed the door inwards.

Yrsa was eating but stopped and her expression froze for a few seconds. "So, you are ready?" She pushed her food back and slowly stood.

He nodded. "Everything is complete. We need to travel now and avoid the cold season." He went to cross to her but she turned away to a bench and busied herself with something there. He waited.

"And now you need some of my warriors to help you climb to the top," she stated.

"Yes. As you promised," he reminded her.

She faced him, her mouth turned down. "But now that the time is here, I don't want to."

He waited.

Troy knew that he couldn't press her too hard. She may just decide to give him a flat 'no', and then he and Anne would be trapped. There was no way he could carry everything up to the top of the mountain, even if he tried to break everything down into smaller loads and make it over dozens of trips.

But even then, how the hell could he inflate the balloon, and keep the bag mouth propped open to receive the hot air? It would be beyond impossible.

"I promised Anne I would get her home," he said. "I will keep that promise."

Her head came up. "And once you have done that, would you return?"

"I may. One day," he said.

He knew what he was telling her might not be the truth, or it was only a partial truth.

Yrsa brightened a little. "Good."

She walked toward him and cupped his face in both her hands. "I think once you get back to where you came from, you will see that it is not your home anymore."

She took his hand and led him to a chair and sat him down. She began to push his hair back from his face. His black hair was long now, reaching down well past his shoulders, and he was the only man to scrape the hair from his face, so he looked different to the other men in the village.

Yrsa talked to him about her new life, and about what she had planned for the clan as their chieftain. While she spoke, she braided his hair at the temples, and finished it with a small knot of dark string.

She smiled. "You look more like a true clan member than ever before." She leaned in to kiss him on the lips, hard, her tongue probing.

After a moment she pulled back, smiling, as she stared into his eyes. "Your kiss tells me I am still in your heart. You say you *may* come back. But I know you will be back." She grabbed his hand and pulled him to his feet.

Yrsa drew him to her large bed. "Now let your body show me one last time."

Troy knew he could never resist her. And even though his mind said no, she was right, his heart and body told a different story.

"It will happen," Troy said as he found Anne again. "Tomorrow at dawn, we'll begin the ascent. She'll have a dozen warriors work with

us. She said she wants to come too.”

“She’ll come too, *huh?*” Anne laughed softly, looking at his braided hair, and turned away to mutter something that sounded rude.

Troy sighed and walked a few paces away to look out over the village. Yrsa said he was more like one of them now, and he noticed no one looked at him strangely, and he knew most of their names, and they knew his. He truly was part of their clan now.

He smiled; and why not? After all, he was Yrsa’s war counsellor.

He wondered then if he would miss this place. He decided he probably would. After all there was something called *holiday memories*. It was when you went away on holiday, say, for five days. Three of those days it might have been terrible weather, but for two days it might also have been magnificent sunshine. Then, years down the track, those two days were the only ones you remembered.

That’s how he thought he would probably remember this hidden mysterious island. Not the Frigga, or the flying undertakers, or even the drekka. But instead, Yrsa and the clan, his sense of belonging, and all the wonders. And he promised himself it would be a secret he’d take to the grave.

He lay down and put an arm underneath his head and stared up at the hut roof. Yrsa had asked him whether he’d come back. He wasn’t sure at the time because he hadn’t given it much thought. After all, his entire focus had just been on getting home.

But would he? He may in the future decide to come back. Just not right away.

“Who knows,” he whispered.

“Huh? Who knows what?” Anne asked from the darkness beside him.

“Ah, who knows if we’ll have luck on our side tomorrow,” he lied.

“We will,” Anne replied. “We make our own luck. That’s why we’re the last two standing.”

From the sound of where her voice was coming from, he thought she had sat up or at least had propped herself up on one hand.

“We’re survivors, Troy. We’ll make it back. I know we will,” she said confidently.

“Anne?” he asked.

“Hm?” He heard her move closer.

“We can’t ever tell anyone about this place. It must be a secret,” he said softly.

“What? Are you kidding?” Her voice rose. “This is like... this isn’t just the find of the century, it’s the find of like, *forever*. It needs to be studied.”

“It would be corrupted, plundered.” He turned to her in the darkness.

“Then we take it to a global body, like the UN,” she urged.

He scoffed. “I wouldn’t trust those rich, over-fed bureaucrats as far as I could throw them.”

She lay down. “I think you just want to protect your girlfriend.”

“Everything here needs to be protected. It’s been unchanged, and in balance for unknown millions of years,” he replied. “I wouldn’t want to screw it up just a few years after people from the outside world, *us*, have found it.”

“I’ll think about it,” she replied. “See you in the morning.”

He sighed and closed his eyes. He knew he’d never be able to sleep.

Troy sat up and groaned. As he expected, he hadn’t slept well, and the scraps of broken sleep he was able to snatch had been haunted by dreams. Bad dreams.

He should have felt elated and excited, but instead he felt apprehensive.

It’s just the fatigue, he told himself.

He got quietly to his feet and opened the door to their hut and stepped out. It was still dark and quiet outside, with just the hint of a silvery dawn glow from above. Sunset, dawn, day, and nighttime was different here. Although the blush of light started as normal in the east and finished in the west, it was more a gently increasing in illumination as if someone was slowly turning the lights up from the dimmer setting as the ice roof caught and passed on a diffused, silvery light.

There was a cool mist winding through the tree trunks and boughs, and the jungle was wrapped in a tomb-like silence and stillness. Troy looked up the hill to where Yrsa’s large hut was. There was a light on inside, but no movement. He then looked over the village.

If things went to plan, it would be the last time he woke up here. He’d either be floating away in their animal hide balloon, or dead.

He watched the village come to life. Some of the men and women gathered and headed out on a hunting trip. A few more were roused to do cooking or stripping down more hides to give to the garment maker.

And then there was the group that were assembling in what was an open area of the village which was the closest thing here to a town square. They were all large, young, and fit, and he bet this was his team.

Yrsa appeared out the front of her hut, and her eyes didn’t go anywhere else but to him. She nodded, and he waved in return.

She came down the path, and this time she wore light clothing with little extraneous buckles, belts, or armor – exactly what you would need if you planned to do some climbing. There was also a tightly

rolled pack on her back which he bet had cold weather gear for the mountain top.

Troy went back into the hut. "Okay, sleepyhead. We've got a big day."

Anne sat up and stretched, yawned, and blinked up at him. She smiled. "I dreamed we were back home." She grinned. "They were all cheering us as we floated in our balloon, a bit like Phineas Fog, in *Around the World in 80 Days*. We both ate ice-cream."

He chuckled. "I think the only ones cheering our return will be any debtors we left behind."

That thought suddenly had him wondering about what exactly he'd be doing for money, as his business would have long ago collapsed. And he sure as hell wasn't getting back into any CIA dark money jobs.

Troy pushed it all away – he had more pressing things to be concerned about before deciding what jobs he was taking or the first lavish meal he'd be having when he touched down on home soil.

Yrsa had joined the warriors and they began to gather up all the materials, and Troy and Anne packed everything they had. He still had the gun with the now single lonely bullet inside. He also had some rope, and a flashlight that was long dead, and little more that had survived from when they arrived around two years ago. Except for the gun and rope, he'd leave it all behind.

They joined the group and were given two extra bundles from the garment women which was their cold weather clothing. The rope-tied packages were bulky and added another ten pounds to their carrying weight. But there was no choice and he and Anne thanked the women, as these clothes would keep them alive for however long they were floating across the frozen sea.

The line of a dozen warriors, plus Yrsa, Troy and Anne, headed toward the mountain. It was a constant presence on the island as it dominated the landscape, and he knew its head poked up through the ice ceiling, and as he walked he looked up at the glowing white roof over their heads. Right above them was the iced in surface of a barren stretch of Greenland that they would arrive out on.

Yrsa walked beside him at the front, and he looked across at her and saw her smiling.

"I'm glad to see you happy today," he said.

"I am." She nodded. "That's because I spoke with the seer-sayer last night. I asked her to see into my future." She turned. "She said you would be with me."

He smiled. "You know I'll always be with you." He touched his chest. "In here."

She shook her head, still smiling. "No, with me in body. I know I have your heart and soul. I see it in your eyes and feel it in your

touch. But your head leads you to a home that will never make you happy.” Her smile brightened. “Like this home makes you happy.”

He laughed softly. “You made me happy. Not so much this dangerous island.”

“I *am* this island,” she replied.

The trek continued for hours more. They were untroubled by predators as they passed through the large cave that opened at the foot of the mountain and stood looking up at the first broken slope and then the sheer rock that needed to be scaled to the opening.

Yrsa had them check their packs, and then they began the climb up the outside of the base of the mountain. Troy was amazed at the strength and athleticism of the men and women as they scaled easily, their long and powerful limbs reaching up and holding onto tiny cracks and jutting rocks with ease.

He also found his increased size and strength welcome as it made the climb a lot easier, and guessed it was because he had probably grown a foot in height and had a commensurate increase in muscle power. Would his friends recognize him? He’d have to think what he would tell them – you don’t vanish for a few years and then reappear a giant – *what? I was always this tall*, might wash if it was just a few inches. But not a foot.

He looked across to Anne she also had the climb under control and didn’t seem to struggle at all. They had a long way to go, but it made him feel less worried about the physical work to come.

They squeezed in through the hole in the mountainside wall and had to tug in some of the larger bundles. Troy worried they might hole the balloon canopy and wouldn’t really know until they began to inflate it.

However, they had brought more sewing materials and glue, so if any repairs needed to be done, they could be actioned on the spot, and only cost them the extra amount of time it took for the glue to dry.

In no time they stood at the base of the chimney-like opening that rose the half mile or more up the inside of the mountain and through the ice ceiling. It was dark inside except for the pinpoints of light as they had all carried the small bundle of glowing embers for illumination, and also to ignite a fire when they reached the top.

Troy stepped up to the wall, finding the first chipped handhold. “Follow me; one body length apart.”

He paused, looking up. “Here we go,” he whispered. And then he began as he led the way.

It took them an hour to scale to the ceiling, and Troy finally climbed out, exhausted, and rolled away from the hole. He flexed his fingers and lay for a moment, letting the pain in his hands, forearms,

and shoulders subside.

He sat up. It was as he remembered: empty and bitterly cold. His sweat began to freeze against his skin. There were the remnants of the fire they had made over a year ago, and also there were still a few scraps of the unburned animal and human bones.

One after the other the group came into the cave. It was fairly large with its other chambers, but still, with twelve, eight-foot and above, tall and broad clan warriors, it suddenly became crowded.

Troy, Anne, and Yrsa went to the hole in the wall leading out onto the bleak surface and peered out. It was still nighttime, pitch black, and a bitter wind cut into their exposed skin.

Anne went to check on the balloon and Troy and Yrsa continued to stare out at the dark surface. Troy estimated it was just past early evening as it was late when they finally made it to the mountain.

“Stars,” Yrsa said as she looked up into the night sky.

“Yes.” Troy smiled across at her. “They say you can make a wish upon them.”

She nodded. “You know what I want.” She faced him. “But I wish you will be safe.”

He half smiled. “I will. No monsters back home.”

She tilted her head. “There are always monsters, Troyson.”

“Maybe different types of monsters,” he replied as he pulled back from the opening.

He knew nothing would happen until morning, and it gave them some time to prepare. Besides, he thought, the more time they spent travelling during the day would be better and safer, he concluded.

Yrsa had the group start several small fires so they could warm themselves, and Troy and Anne took the opportunity to don their warm weather clothing they had been given.

Later, and after the group had eaten and drunk some water, they allotted tasks – laying out and checking the balloon, putting together the basket, and checking their supplies. In a few hours they were done, and they settled down to talk softly around their fires.

Anne was still on her hands and knees crawling over the canopy, checking it for minor holes or tears, and he sat next to Yrsa staring into their fire.

She sipped water and turned to him. “Part of me still doesn’t believe you will go.”

He showed her the medallion she had given him so long ago. “As long as I have this close to me, I’ll have you close to me.”

She smiled and opened her cloak, revealing his father’s wristwatch on some sort of leather-like rope around her neck. “And I have your timekeeper.”

She reached up to rub a thumb slowly over its glass face as she

stared down at it. "I still like it." She let it drop and placed a hand over it.

"It used to remind me of home, and family," he said.

She nodded, still stroking it. "Then that's what it will remind me of as well. A home and family. That waits for you." She went to reach out for him, but Anne joined them and Yrsa pulled back and returned to staring into the fire.

Yrsa tugged her cloak tighter around her body and lay down on her side facing away from them. He could see that her neck was craned forward so he guessed she was still looking at the watch, to her, a strange object from another world.

Troy and Anne finally lay back. Most of the others were already snoring loudly. As there was a freezing wind blowing in through the crack in the wall leading to the outside, Troy doubted he'd ever get off to sleep with the cold, the hard ground, and the snoring.

"Thank you."

He turned to just make out the glint of the fire in Anne's open eyes as she faced him.

"For what?" he whispered back.

"For being a man of your word. I know you're only going back because of me." She reached out from under the cloak and gripped his forearm.

"Don't be silly," he said softly. "I can't wait for my ice-cream."

She squeezed his arm for a second or two, then let him go and rolled away.

Troy sighed as he stared up at the cave ceiling, and promised himself that everything would be better when he got home. He was so tired he didn't even remember when it was he drifted off.

Early morning, and Troy woke to one of the men adding some wood to the fire. There was a weak light coming in through the crack in the outer wall and he stood and quickly crossed to it.

Thankfully the wind had eased in the night, and it was relatively calm outside. That was a good thing as it cut down on the bone numbing wind-chill and would also allow the bag to be filled a little more safely. But they'd need a breeze to launch, and one at their backs when they set off.

Troy held each side of the crack and leaned far out – it was just on sunup, and there was little to see but white on white. There were clouds overhead, so the light was always going to be diffused.

He continued looking up. "Real clouds," he whispered. He hadn't seen them in years. He then leaned even further out and looked down – several hundred feet to the ice and rocks below. He then looked up the cliff and saw that the mountain peak tapered – good – it meant

that the balloon canopy shouldn't get snagged as it filled.

Troy then pulled back to look at the opening, judging its width.

Damn, he thought. It was narrower than he remembered.

It meant they would have to inflate the balloon outside and construct the basket out there as well. Then they'd need to tie it off when the balloon was able to support its fully loaded weight so Troy and Anne could step out into it.

He looked back into the cave and saw the piles and piles of wood. Most of it would need to be burned inside the cave and then the hot air fanned outward. He sighed; it would be no easy job, and he bet breathing the air in here would become uncomfortable. The good thing was the warmer air from down below was coming up the chimney they had all just climbed, and exiting through the hole in the wall he was standing at – he could feel the air moving past him now. That meant that most, if not all, of the hot air and smoke should be forced outwards – exactly what he and Anne needed.

"Thinking about our escape, or home?" Anne asked coming closer to lean against him.

"Yes, both. But now I'm thinking about the things we need to do to get the balloon inflated, the basket set, and us and our supplies loaded." He turned to her and grinned. "And then sail away and in the right direction."

"I believe in luck. And karma. I don't think whoever has been looking out for us all this time would let us come this far to only die now. I think we'll make it home." She smiled up at him.

"That's what I like – the power of positive thinking." He turned to look back out at the landscape. "It'll take us most of the day to inflate the balloon. And as long as the weather is good, there's nothing stopping us from taking straight off. Besides, the more we wait after the balloon is inflated, the more hot air will leak back out."

She nodded. "Got it. If the bag fills, we're out of here." She turned to the cave interior. "Time to wake the gang. We've got a lot of work to do."

As Troy had thought, the hard part was getting the bag to fill. They had a fire lit and then allowed to die down a little. Then they made a large pipe from something like a giant bamboo plant that was about a foot and a half wide and hollow. One end was placed over the fire, and the other end inserted into the balloon.

Most of the balloon was hanging outside, and it sagged downward, and after several hours, just as Troy was getting a knot in his stomach from the thought of impending failure, he noticed that the end of the balloon was beginning to lift.

For the next few hours, they added more wood, and the balloon got

bigger and began to rise up the external wall. Outside there was still little wind and was perfect for their setup. Once the balloon was near full and roped to some rocks inside the cave, they began the task of assembling the basket, adding in the burner tray above it and under the canopy spout, and tossing in their supplies.

In another few hours the balloon strained against the ropes wanting to be free, and Troy thought it looked ready. But he guessed there was only one way to find out if it was going to work or not.

"I'm going to test it," he said, and with a few of the warriors holding the now tethered basket, he stepped out and climbed in.

"Whoa." It wobbled.

Troy gripped the ropes and looked up. The large stone bowl held a pile of slowly burning wood stock that allowed the hot air to rise into the balloon canopy and was scalloped so the hot ash wouldn't just blow away.

The plan was, if they wanted to rise, they added more wood and increased the size of the blaze. And if they needed to descend, there was another flatter tray they placed over the top, cutting off the heat but leaving the embers to smolder.

The ropes creaked and made stretching sounds as the canopy pulled on them. Troy was better able to survey the landscape now he was on the outside and saw nothing around them, but knew that the coast was in the east, and that was where the sun was slowly rising, making the heavy cloud cover glow a little more in that direction.

The wind was light, but he saw that the smoke from his burning tray wafted toward the east – where they wanted to go. Right now, the conditions were perfect for a launch.

"We're ready," he said softly.

Just saying the words gave him a funny feeling in the stomach – he didn't know if it was trepidation, his nerves, or excitement. But he couldn't put it off any longer.

Troy looked back into the cave and saw the crowd of faces watching him – Anne looked beside herself with excitement, some of the warriors also watched wide-eyed, and of course, standing just behind them was Yrsa. She was the only one who had a stony expression. He saw she had a hand closed over the wristwatch. Her only keepsake from him.

Troy held out a hand, and one of the warriors grabbed it and helped him back inside.

"Load it up; we're good to go," he said.

Yrsa ordered the large men and women to begin placing the piles of wood, bark, and hair-like fibers into the base of the basket. Plus, the meager amount of food and water they needed.

Anne set about packing her materials and then was helped into the

basket to begin sorting their materials and make some space for them.

Troy walked up to Yrsa.

"You are ready?" she asked.

He nodded. "I wanted to thank you. For everything."

He didn't know what to do or say, so just held out a hand. Yrsa grabbed it and forcefully pulled him into an embrace. She kissed his mouth so hard it hurt, and he was sure would bruise his lips. He could smell her perfume and her sweat, and he knew he'd remember that intoxicating combination forever.

She pulled back, just a little, and her eyes bored into his. "Come back to me," she whispered into his face.

He kissed her again quickly. "I'll never forget you."

Her expression sagged a little, but she nodded.

She then touched his wristwatch hanging around her neck. "There will always be time here for you, Troyson."

In minutes more the balloon was loaded, and Anne leaned out of the basket toward the cave mouth.

"*Troy, we have the wind,*" she yelled, urging him on.

"Go. Before I change my mind," Yrsa said.

The warriors untied the ropes from the rocks in the cave and dug their heels in and leaned back as they held on. Troy climbed over them and jumped in while Yrsa also held the side of the basket.

Troy turned to Anne. "Ready?"

She clasped her hands together. "Oh God, yes. I'm so nervous and excited, I'm giddy. Yes, yes, I'm ready. Let's go home."

He nodded and turned back. "Let the ropes go." He placed his hand over Yrsa's as she held the basket, and her hand now went to his arm.

As the basket lifted off, her hand slowly slid down along his arm until just the fingers were touching. He looked back into her face, and those blue eyes swam with tears.

"*Come back to me,*" she mouthed.

And then she was gone as the balloon lifted away from the cave mouth and rose rapidly in the air.

Troy stared down at the tiny hole trying to see her but couldn't as the mighty Mother of the Sky soon became nothing but a mountain peak in a sea of snow and ice. The wind blowing from the west grabbed their balloon and pushed out toward the east and they quickly gathered speed. He finally looked away.

He remembered to feed the tray with sticks and bark to keep the hot air rising and filling the balloon. So far, the height they were at had an accommodating breeze, so they only needed to stay where they were for now.

Over the side the ground began to pass quickly, and in no time, they crossed from the blanket of snow and ice, to broken ice, and then an

iron-grey water, looking as deadly and cold as he remembered it from all those years ago when they had first arrived.

“And here we go,” he said to Anne, who stared down watching the water, as if transfixed.

They took turns monitoring the breeze, their height, and the amount of wood they placed in the burning-tray. Troy knew that if push came to shove, they could begin to burn the basket wood itself, but if it started to come to that, and they were still not in sight of land, they'd be in big trouble.

Hours went by. Then more hours, and he guessed they had been travelling now for around ten hours. Their speed was good, he estimated at about one hundred knots per hour, or just under a hundred miles per hour.

However, throughout the day the wind shifted, now coming from the northeast, and pushing them southward. It also increased in speed and therefore so did they.

It was after about twelve hours, when their wood stocks were running low, that Troy first caught sight of the land in the distance.

“*Land ho!*” he shouted and pointed. Anne had been sitting on the basket floor, hugging her knees and quickly jumped to her feet, clinging to him in the rocking balloon.

His fatigued face broke into a grin. “I promised I'd get you home. And I did.”

“*That's it, that's it!*” She jumped up and down for a moment before catching herself after the basket creaked ominously. “We made it.” She frowned. “But we're almost heading parallel to it.”

“Unfortunately, the wind has shifted, and we've come well down the coast, and it may take us a while to intersect with the land. It will be slower, but we'll get there,” he said.

In another hour the wind dropped as the evening was coming on them and they were now close to the shoreline.

Troy guessed they might be able to swim it, but they'd be freezing by the time they pulled themselves out.

“Lights,” he said, pointing. But as they got closer, he saw that there were columns of smoke rising, and the lights were actually from the fires.

“It's burning,” Anne said. “I don't... understand.”

The balloon scudded on, and in the hours that rolled by, they passed more towns, big and small. And they were always the same – either burned down to rubble, or still on fire.

“Was there a war?” Anne asked. “Did it happen while we were under the ice?”

“Maybe,” Troy said and squinted in at the shoreline.

The night was rushing in at them and Troy saw that their wood stock was near gone.

“Got to take it down. Hopefully we can get closer to the land,” he said.

“But there’s nothing there,” Anne replied.

“I know, but if we don’t try and get ashore and the wind swings around, it could blow us back out to sea. Then we’ll be in for a long, cold swim.”

Over the next twenty minutes the balloon slowly lost altitude. Up ahead there was a jutting peninsula, that at least had a flat top and rose a hundred feet above the water. If he timed it right, he could just come down on top of it.

“I’m going to aim for that spit of land there.” He pointed. “Get ready, we touch down, we bail out.”

They got closer, and closer, and the balloon came down. Troy gritted his teeth, as for a while it looked like they had descended way too much, and they were about to crash into the cliff on the side of the land mass.

But a small updraft lifted them, and with the wind all but nonexistent now, the balloon came down close to some trees, skidded for about twenty feet, and then came to rest.

Troy threw the ropes over the side and leapt out, and quickly found a rock and tied them to the ground, securing the balloon. He braced his legs and held the basket.

“Out,” he yelled to Anne.

She clambered over the side of the basket, fell, but got up quickly. Above them the balloon, now not being constantly filled with hot air, was beginning to sag.

Troy looked around. “I remember some of the towns and villages along this coast from when I was a kid and had my dad bring me here to do some Viking research.” He turned. “I’m betting we’re close to Maloy, a good-sized town. Should be just around that headland,” he said.

Anne whooped, held her arms wide, and grinned from ear to ear. She began to run in a large circle. “No monsters.” She stopped. “We’re finally safe.”

Troy bent and placed a hand flat on the ground. “Grass. Feels good.”

Anne drew in a deep lung-filling breath. “What will they make of us?” She looked down at her clothing. “A pair of extra tall modern Vikings just descended from the sky.”

“I’ll settle for them making me a cup of hot coffee,” he replied.

“And my ice-cream,” she reminded him.

He reached into the basket to grab some of their supplies. “We can

travel for a while but may have to camp out.”

“I don’t care,” she laughed. “We’re home, and there’s no raptors hiding in the brush, no flying pterosaurs to pluck us into the air, and no giant snakes lurking in the trees.” She turned back with arms wide. “Like I said, there are no more monsters.”

The balloon burst.

Anne screamed and Troy spun.

The canopy hadn’t exploded but was torn to shreds by something they couldn’t see in the darkness. One second it was there, sitting like a large patchwork Frankenstein of a balloon, rising nearly seventy-feet in the air, and then next the bag was shredded, *being shredded*, as if something was shaking it like a dog with a bone in its mouth.

“What the hell?” Anne yelled.

“Run. *Run!*” Troy grabbed her, and they sprinted along the cliff top.

The pair ran for the next hour until Anne grabbed him and slowed him down.

“Stop, stop!” she gasped. “I’ve had it.”

Troy turned to walk backwards for a while and couldn’t see anything following them. “What the hell just happened?” he asked. “What did that?”

“Probably just the trees.” Anne gulped in more air and straightened. “We were close to those trees, maybe a breeze pushed their sharp branches...” She slowed. “I need to rest.”

They continued on until Troy found a single farmhouse, empty, and he and Anne went in. The cupboards were bare and the refrigerator, like the rest of the house, was without power, so everything inside was spoiled. And had been for weeks or months.

“Looters?” he scoffed. “What happened here?”

She opened her bag. “We’ve got some dried meat to last a few days. We need to rest here for the night. We can scout ahead in the morning.”

He nodded. “I think the town of Maloy should be just a few miles further down the coast. It’s a good-sized community of about 4000 people. We can get help there.”

They found a bedroom that had less debris than the rest of the house and fell on the uncovered mattress. Troy lay there listening for a while, but he was so shattered, emotionally and physically, that even if there had of been a war, a bomb going off, or bands of looters, it couldn’t have woken him.

The dawn light seeped in. Troy blinked a few times, trying to work out where he was as everything seemed a different color here. It was clearer, brighter.

And then he remembered why, and suddenly leapt to his feet and

rushed to the window. He grinned, looking up at a dawn sky that was still a purple, but he knew would lighten to first a pale blue and then a full sunshine. He realized he hadn't seen the sun in two years.

He looked over his shoulder; behind him Anne still slept, and he headed outside to circle the property.

His joy was short-lived.

"Ah, shit." He guessed he found the former occupants.

There were the remains of a man and a woman with hands tied behind their backs and lashed to a stake. They'd been dead for quite a while, and their throats had been cut, and the man had his ears removed. Troy knew torture when he saw it.

"Troy!" Anne yelled from inside.

"Stay there, I'm coming." He glanced again at the bodies. He decided he wouldn't tell Anne about this, but he'd get them moving quickly. Something bad was going on here, and he tended to think it might be more a human-based evil.

Together they huddled in the room, and only now in the light could Troy see that the mattress they had been lying on had a large dark stain at the center – blood.

After a meagre meal of dried meat and sips of water, they set off again. For some reason Troy felt like they were back on the primordial mysterious island, and the only difference being there was less jungle for them to navigate.

They trekked for hours, and every now and then they came across properties that were burned to the ground or looked bombed out – not just ransacked or burned down – but literally destroyed down to ground level as if someone had run a bulldozer over them.

They soon came to a main road, eerily quiet, and with signs announcing that Maloy was just five miles away. They had already walked nearly that distance, and so far they had seen no one.

Troy decided to walk them in at the tree line at the edge of the road, rather than in its center. His gut told him that there might be roving bands of looters and given what he had seen back at the house, if he was right then they probably had no qualms using extreme violence to get what they wanted. And his gun only had one bullet left.

It was hours before they trudged to the top of a hill, and at the crest had a good view over the landscape and the town of Maloy.

Troy looked down on it with dead eyes and a sinking heart.

"I don't understand," Anne said softly.

The town itself was on the water's edge, and the business district was close to a main hub there. Hundreds of additional houses climbed a small mountain or large hill and spread over about a mile of countryside.

He guessed in this town at one time everyone had a view of the sea. It must have been nice. Then. Because now the town was near destroyed.

From their position, Troy and Anne could see there were the scars of definite bomb blasts creating huge craters in the landscape, and also within the town itself, that had reduced huge swathes of homes to deep pits of melted glass and scorched concrete.

"This is a war zone," he said softly. "But a war against who?"

"I wonder if anyone is alive down there," she said wistfully.

"No movement, and no boats," he observed. "I think if they could get out, they did."

"What we need is information," she said. "There's a lot of larger buildings still intact. I say we have a look in them." She looked up at him. "Maybe there's a radio."

"Good a plan as any. Let's check them out," he said and started down. "But we stay alert."

It was mid-morning by the time they walked down the road and entered the main area of town. Troy put a hand over his neck.

"I'm burning," he scoffed softly. "Not used to direct sunlight. We better watch that."

The doors were wide open on the first building they came to, and inside it was like a hurricane had hit. It was some sort of office and every cabinet, drawer, and store room had been opened and emptied and their contents scattered about.

"Our friendly neighborhood looters again," Anne said.

Troy automatically felt over his shoulder for his sword, and found it gone. He remembered now; they had debated whether they would need the extra weight. In the end they decided against them. After all, why would he need a sword in Norway?

He then felt for the gun in his waistband.

They continued their search and Troy had to duck underneath the doorframes as he was probably over seven feet tall now. Anne must have been easily six-foot-six, so a pair of giants in Viking clothing carrying swords might have freaked out the locals.

They left the building and walked a little further down the road to a store. Troy expected it to be looted, but he hoped they left something, anything, as it would have been well received.

"Psst."

Troy and Anne stopped and looked at each other.

"Psst."

Anne frowned. "Did you...?"

"I heard it," Troy replied.

Anne nodded toward a small building that was little bigger than a shed. "There's someone in the doorway. There."

A small arm appeared and waved at them.

"Could be an ambush," Troy said, remembering the tortured couple back at the farmhouse.

"What do you want to do? This is the first living person we've seen. And they want to speak to us." Anne turned. "And I want to speak to them."

Troy took Anne's arm and eased her back a few steps. "Here's the plan; one of us stays in front and keeps their attention. The other one goes back in the building and circles around behind them, and then..."

"I'll circle around. I can move quickly. And besides, you're big enough now to keep anyone's attention." She grinned and stepped back into the shadows. "Give me five minutes. Watch for me."

Troy waited a few moments and then stepped back out into the sunshine and walked a dozen steps forward. He raised a hand. "Hello. We're friends."

He didn't have to raise his voice as the deathly stillness made his words carry easily. He took another half dozen slow steps, wanting all the focus to be on him for as long as needed, as he knew Anne was working her way in behind him.

The hand came out again and waved wildly.

Troy stopped for a moment. Did that signal mean he was saying hello, stop, be quiet, or something else?

"Do you want to come out?" He had raised his voice.

"*Shuuuush.*" The hissed words were accompanied by the arm furiously waving him down or waving him back.

"What the hell?" He looked around, not seeing anything. "What is it?" he asked.

Troy was still about two hundred feet away and saw Anne about to come around the front of the hut. He was going to continue moving forward again when a shadow passed over him temporarily blotting out the sun.

Anne ran lightly on her toes around behind the buildings until she judged she was near the shed. Then she crouched and crept forward. She quickly spotted it and saw that it had a side window and headed for that first.

As she approached, she slowed, and looked up to see Troy slowly walking down the center of the road, arms out. She grinned; even to her he looked huge now. And with his long dark hair, powerful physique, and Viking garb, how could he not draw attention?

She silently eased up beside the window and glanced in. There was a kid in there, a boy, covered from head to toe in dirt and must have been no more than about ten, twelve tops.

She watched him for a moment and looked around. There was

bedding all piled up in a corner like a nest. And tins of food, some emptied, but many more stacked against the wall, with packs of bottled water. At least he'd be able to tell them where he got that so they could eat something other than dried saurian meat.

Anne saw there was only two openings – the front door and the window, so she straightened and walked around to the door.

“Hey, kid.”

The boy shrieked and leapt backwards.

“*Take it easy, take it easy,*” she said as she held her hands out. “We’re here to help.”

Anne got down on her haunches and rested her forearms on her thighs. Her large body blocked the doorway, and she watched as the kid tried to claw his way in under the pile of blankets.

“My name is Anne.” She gave him what she hoped was her most non-threatening smile. “We’re not here to hurt you.” She waited a moment. “Can you tell me who you are?”

The boy stared, his eyes like moons. “*Uh...*” He licked his lips. “Where...?”

“Where did we come from?” Anne sighed. “That’s a long story.”

“You’re giants,” he whispered.

“Not really.” Anne thumbed over her shoulder. “My friend out there is called Troy.” She held out her hand to him. “Come out and talk to us. Tell us what happened. We’ve been away. *A long way away.*”

“I’m Elrik.” He half lifted his hand and then pulled back. “The monsters did it. They’re still out there.”

Anne frowned and glanced over her shoulder and then back. “The town is empty. There’s nothing out there but us.” She kept her hand outstretched. “Please, come out. We can help each other.”

Elrik emerged a little more and his face was so grimy he looked like one of those kids that worked in the mines in the 1800s.

He took her hand and she smiled. “Good boy. Thank you, Elrik.” She slowly stood. “Come and meet my friend Troy.”

She led the boy out, and looked to Troy who was now looking up at the sky. A shadow passed over them and Elrik suddenly screamed. He clung tight to her and pressed his face into her hip.

He said something that was muffled. And she thought it sounded like *dragon*.

She looked up. “Oh.”

Troy froze as the monstrous thing landed behind Anne and the boy, crushing his small home. It was a smaller version of the land leviathan, the drekka, they had encountered on the hidden island, but this one had leathery wings sprouting from a huge bunch of muscle lumping its back.

The yellow slitted eyes of the hulking beast were on the two humans, and Anne barely had time to scream as she clung to the boy, trying to shield him from the horror.

Oh no, Troy knew what was coming. He pulled his gun and began to run to them.

Anne had her arms thrown around the boy and turned her back as the dragon opened its mouth to spit a stream of yellow bile to completely cover the pair.

“No-ooo.” Troy stopped and pointed the gun at the dragon.

He felt his gorge rise as Anne, his only friend in the world, and the boy, began to dissolve before his eyes. The boy crumbled first, and the larger Anne continued to scream in a mind-tearing agony that would haunt him forever.

He brought the gun muzzle down to Anne. And fired. She then dropped, silent.

Troy could only stare as steam rose from them as flesh and bone shrunk down into a mound of red sludge.

He dropped the gun, and the monster ignored him as it came forward to lick up its meal. Troy’s vision became blurry with tears as he could only watch.

He had promised to get her home. And he had come back because of that promise. But now he knew; it had been all for nothing.

Without weapons of any sort, he knew he was insignificant, or maybe a future meal for the monster, and that was all. All he would do was end up committing suicide and joining Anne.

Or he could live to fight another day.

He turned and ran. And didn’t stop running until he went over the hill and vanished into the forest.

CHAPTER 27

Two years later – deep beneath Greenland on a mysterious island

Yrsa watched the small boy playing in the dirt. He seemed well advanced and smarter than the others of his age and was already forming words. And he had piercing blue eyes and unusually dark hair – rare amongst the clan who were usually white or red haired.

The boy got to his feet, carefully walking with arms out for balance toward her. She held her arms wide. “Come, Stromson.”

She smiled as the boy waddled into them.

She lifted him and his tiny pudgy hands went to the wristwatch on the string around her neck, lifting it, and examining it.

“Your father’s,” she said as she held him up. “One day he will come back for it. And for us.”

EPISODE 23

Here be dragons

EPILOGUE

Troy Strom sat in the cold, dark cave with a grimy bath towel held around his shoulders and stared out at the bleak iron-grey water.

"It was all for nothing," he muttered. "All for nothing."

A freezing wind blew in and he hunkered down a little more. And though he had the means, he wouldn't dare light a fire.

There was nothing left. No one had come, will come, or would ever come. From what he had been able to piece together from scraps of newspapers, and dwindling radio messages, the dragon infestation had spread across the world – first Europe, then to Asia, and then finally the Americas.

"It was the rubies," he whispered. "Anne had been right all along."

The beautiful-looking objects had been irresistible to us avaricious human beings. And once away from the island, the sunshine allowed them to grow, quicker, and to also sprout wings – this was why there was only one on the island. Because there was no sunshine. And why would you need wings when there was a roof over your head?

But once they could fly, they could go anywhere. They'd eat everything and then move on, like a plague of mountain-sized, flesh eating, acid spewing locusts. Soon, the world would be cleansed, and nothing over fifty pounds would remain alive, just like what happened 65 million years ago.

He drew in a freezing breath and let it out slowly and it made a small vapor-ghost as it left his lips to be whipped away by the breeze.

He knew if he stayed, he might be the last witness to the new mass extinction. It would eventually happen. Everywhere.

Except for one place he knew.

He stared again at the sixty-foot sailboat, sitting low to the water, half submerged beside the dock. Its sails were still furled, and he bet if he pumped it out, it would float as long as its fiberglass hull wasn't holed.

Over the last few weeks, he'd been pushing smaller boats out, letting the wind take them. And none had been attacked.

He just needed to survive the winter, and then when spring warmed the waters, Odin's Gate would be open again. And he knew where to find it.

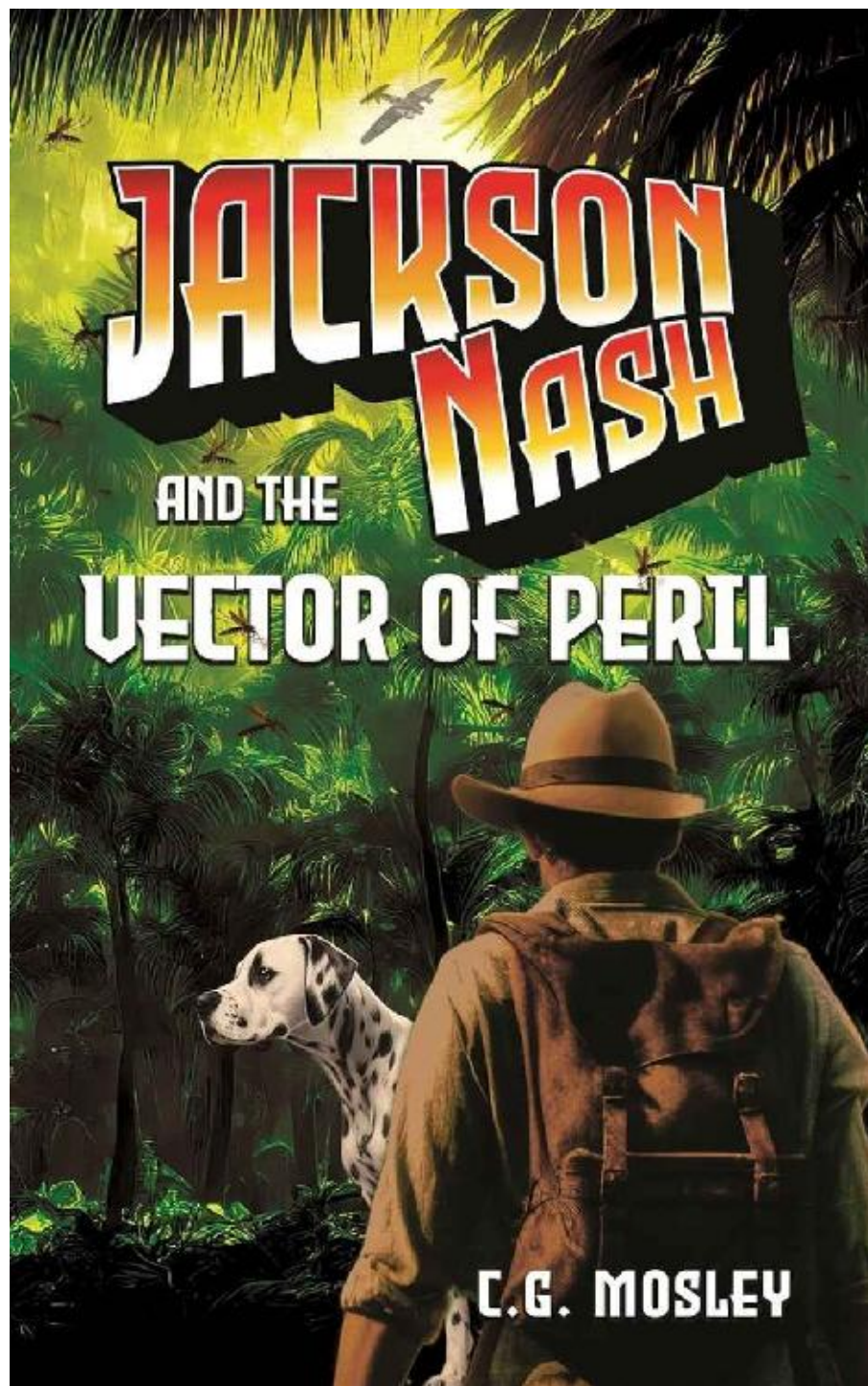
His hand went to the medallion around his neck, and he pressed it between thumb and fingers, rubbing it gently.

"I'm coming, Yrsa." His eyes blurred. "I'm coming home."

END

Read on for a free sample of Jackson Nash and the Vector of Peril.

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Chapter 1

Blue Mountains, Australia

Even though Jackson Nash was cold, wet, and hungry, he was close. Too close to give up now. Duke, his two-year-old dalmatian was shivering but his tail was wagging, nonetheless.

"Almost there, boy," he muttered with a tone of encouragement. "When we get these pictures and specimens it'll make the whole thing worthwhile."

They'd spent well over a day looking for a cave that would deliver what they were searching for. The Australian wilderness had been beautiful, to say the least. Fortunately, the canopy of the forest had done a good job of shielding them from the blistering heat bearing down on them from the sun above. The real challenge began when they'd approached the base of the mountains.

It was supposed to be easy, but up until this point, it had been anything but. There was one cave in particular that had been described to him by the locals in Sydney that he'd been seemingly wandering aimlessly to find, but now it seemed his efforts had finally paid off. If this one didn't produce the results, then Duke wouldn't be the only one traveling back to the states with his tail between his legs.

The cave floor sloped downward, and it was damp. A good sign. Duke struggled to keep his footing and there was little Jack could do to help as he was having a difficult time himself. With a flashlight in one hand, his free one was used to clutch, claw and grab whatever he could to stay on his feet. Tumbling down the slope would be disastrous as his satchel contained glass jars and a camera, both of which would most likely be destroyed in the fall.

Duke whimpered as all four of his paws slid in opposite directions. The dalmatian slid into a nearby rock and then pinballed into another.

"It's dryer near the cave wall," Jack called out. "There is more traction there."

Duke looked back at him and then gingerly drew closer to him.

"Just think about how hard it's going to be to go back up," Jack said with a nervous chuckle.

Finally, after what seemed like a few hundred feet of descent, the rocky ground leveled out a bit. Walking became substantially easier. Jack paused and looked back toward the cave entrance. He could see the steady stream of water trickling down the path from which they'd just come. There had been a terrible thunderstorm the night before and he guessed that had contributed to the tricky conditions they'd just had to endure. He then looked to Duke, leaning over to scratch him behind an ear.

"I think the worst is behind us," he told the dog, though the statement was more hopeful than confident.

Jack and Duke ventured deeper into the blackness of the cave. The flashlight of course gave them comfort, but in the back of his mind Jack imagined what they'd experience if the light went out. He had extra batteries, but he desperately hoped he wouldn't need them. It wasn't the dark that scared him. He was in a strange land and in a strange environment. Frankly, he was a little unsure of what could be lurking in the shadows, and he did his best not to dwell on it.

Deeper into the cave they went and soon the sound of running water filled their ears. Duke sniffed the air and looked up at Jack.

"I know," he said. "Good sign. I told you; we're close."

Before long the cave walls opened, the ceiling rose, and they found themselves in a large cavern. Jack shone the flashlight toward the ceiling at the abundance of stalactites hanging overhead. When he directed the beam of light downward, they found a glistening stream of water rushing by. Jack kneeled beside Duke.

"I think we made it, boy," he said cheerfully. Duke looked back at him and licked his face, nearly knocking his hat off. "I guess there is only one way to know for sure," Jack said. He took a deep breath and clicked the flashlight off.

For a moment there was only darkness, but seconds later the environment around them began to glow a hue of blue-green light. It seemed the longer they sat in darkness, the brighter the cave became. Soon it felt as if they were no longer on Earth anymore, perhaps on a faraway planet. It was the most beautiful spectacle Jack had ever seen. Duke's dark eyes shimmered as the canine peered around the room at the incredible display.

"We found it," Jack said, a bit of relief in his tone. "This is probably the largest collection of glowworms on the planet." He glanced over at Duke. "Boy, do you have any idea how long I've wanted to see this?"

Duke looked at him and then back to the cavern ceiling, wagging his tail.

Jack pulled his box camera from his satchel and positioned himself to get the shots he was after. He tipped his fedora up just a bit and then leaned back to snap the photos. He moved around to get different angles and snapped photo after photo. The glowworms weren't actually worms at all. They were the larvae of fungus gnats. To catch other insects to feed upon, the glowworms constructed silk threads that hung from the cave ceiling. The threads were covered in a sticky mucous that contained chemicals and enzymes that, when mixed with oxygen, created a beautiful display of bioluminescent glow. The lights attracted other insects that would eventually doom

them to become stuck in the mucous and soon after devoured by the glowworm.

Once he was finished taking pictures, Jack carefully placed the camera back into the satchel. He then placed the satchel on the cavern floor, but not before retrieving a glass jar from it.

"Now we need a specimen to take back," he told Duke as he looked for an area in which he could climb higher.

He made his way around the cavern wall until he found a series of ledges that allowed him to climb high enough to reach a low hanging thread. Jack scooped it into a glass jar and then carefully tucked it away into his satchel. He then climbed down as Duke looked on, eagerly anticipating his return.

"You ready to get out of here?" he asked.

Duke sat, wagging his tail. The dog couldn't talk but Jack could easily read his eyes. It was clear that Duke wanted to go home as much as he did.

"Alright, let's call it a day," he said, patting the dog on the head.

Jack took great care in placing the camera and glass jar into a waterproof bag. He then wrapped them both into a towel. It would be a wet, dangerous climb back out of the cave. He took only one step in the direction from which they'd come when he heard a sound that got his attention. He paused and turned his head slightly. Duke stopped too; his ears perked up. Jack had almost decided his ears were playing tricks on him when he finally heard it again. This time he was certain what it was. Voices echoed from further toward the interior of the cave. It was now obvious to Duke too because he began to growl.

"Stop that," Jack snapped in a whisper. "Don't give us away. We have no idea who that is."

The dalmatian seemed to ignore him, taking a few steps forward. Duke's growling began to rumble louder. Jack chased after him, grabbing him by the collar. He kneeled and pulled the dog toward his chest.

"That's enough, boy," he said softly. "Let's check it out, but quietly."

Jack crept along the wall of the cavern, keeping a hand on his holstered Colt .38 special while he did so. For a time, all he had to guide him was the faint blue-green light provided by the glowworms above. That all changed when he finally came upon an abrupt turn in the cave. He knelt, staying in the shadows, and held Duke with his free hand. There, in the open void of yet another cavern, were three men. All of them were well-dressed. A bit disheveled, but well-dressed. Two of the men were standing, speaking loudly and in frantic tones. There was a Buick parked behind them. The car had

apparently been driven into the cave from an entrance on the opposite side of the mountain. The vehicle was light in color. It was almost impossible to tell in the faint light, but Jack guessed it was probably gray.

While the two men chatted anxiously, another man was seated on the stone floor, his back against the car. There was something all over the side of the car behind him. Jack couldn't be sure, but his gut told him it was blood. There must've been another entrance into the cave; one large enough to drive a car into.

Had the man been shot?

Jack slowed his breathing and concentrated on the men's voices. Their frantic states and thick Australian accents made them a bit hard to understand. He petted Duke to keep the dog calm while he listened.

"What do you mean there was no way to avoid it?" the man on the right asked angrily. He was wearing a black suit with a black hat to match. His tie had been loosened to the point it was dangling from his neck, moving as he swayed.

"Just what I said!" the other man snapped back. He was wearing a white dress shirt with suspenders and slacks. His shirt was stained with something, probably more blood.

"Charlie, I'm telling you," the man in suspenders continued. "They were expecting us. We got too careless. The cops were onto us. We were sitting ducks!"

Charlie, the man in the black suit, paced a moment and then looked pitifully down at the man on the ground. "Well, what are we gonna do about poor Tommy?" he asked, a bit panicked now. "He's bleeding out!"

Suspenders shook his head and sighed. "We take our money, we leave Tommy here, and we call the cops to let them know where he is."

Charlie didn't like the answer. He marched to where his partner stood and grabbed him by the collar, yanking him toward him. "I'm not leaving Tommy here!"

"You got a better idea?" Suspenders asked, a bit nervously.

"Yeah, we take him to a hospital!" Charlie snapped. "Do you have a problem with that?"

Before the other man could answer, Tommy began to cough. Frothy blood trickled from his lips.

"Look at him, Charlie!" Suspenders shouted. "He's a goner!"

Charlie knelt. "Tommy, look at me," he said, looking the injured man directly in the eyes.

There was a long moment of silence. It was all Jack could do to keep himself and Duke silent. It was becoming obvious that Tommy

had died.

“Dammit,” Charlie said, rising to his feet.

“Is he dead?” Suspenders asked.

Charlie didn’t say a word, he just pulled his gun and pointed it at the other man’s head.

“W-what are you doing, Charlie?”

“Looks like you got what you wanted,” he replied. “Tommy’s dead, which means more money for you. Just the way you planned it.”

Suspenders laughed nervously, then took an angry tone. “I didn’t have anything to do with this! I told you what happened, the cops were ready for us!” He marched toward the car and yanked out a large black bag. “Look at this!” he shouted. “Do you have any idea how much money is in here?”

Charlie moved closer, the gun still pointed at his head. “The only way the cops would know is if someone tipped them off. Put the bag on the ground.”

Suspenders sighed heavily but complied with the request. If he wanted to argue the matter further, he refrained from doing so.

Jack could see where things were going. They’d already seen one man die, and he wasn’t very interested in seeing another man die too. He’d been leaning on a rock and his legs were beginning to cramp. Carefully, Jack pushed himself back onto his feet, but a slick spot on the rocky floor found the heel of his boot. He slipped and landed on his bottom, sending an echo of sound across the cavern.

The two men whipped their heads around toward him and Duke.

“Hey, who’s there?” Suspenders asked, and he wasted no time marching in his direction.

Charlie had suddenly turned his gun away from the other man, now toward Jack.

A lantern sparked to life and in an instant, the large cavern became illuminated with light, immediately revealing Jack and Duke.

“Well look at this,” Suspenders said, grinning slyly. “We’ve got a visitor.”

“Who the hell are you, mate?” Charlie barked.

Jack held his hands up as he regained his footing. “I’m Jackson Nash, an entomologist from the United States,” he said. “I was here studying the glowworms. I heard voices and just came this way to see who was here.”

“That right?” Suspenders asked. “And just how long have you been standing there?”

“Not long at all,” Jack answered quickly, with a smile. “Just walked up as a matter of fact. You guys alright? You’re awfully deep into this cave.”

Suspenders held the lantern up a bit higher and looked Jack over.

He then looked back to Charlie. "Looks like he's got a gun!"

"What's in the bag?" Charlie asked, ignoring the observation.

Jack glanced down at his satchel. "Oh, just a camera and some glowworm specimens."

"He's got a camera!" Suspenders said, clearly panicked.

"Mr. Nash, we're going to need you to hand over that satchel," Charlie ordered, the gun still pointed at him.

"Sure thing," he answered. "What's in yours?" he asked boldly, glancing at the large bag Suspenders had pulled from the car.

Charlie's brow furrowed. It was obvious the question angered him. "Get his bag," he muttered to Suspenders.

Jack watched the thin man approach. Duke began to growl and the hair on his back began to stand up. This made Suspenders stop in his tracks.

"Get your dog under control, Mr. Nash," Charlie ordered.

"I'm terribly sorry," Jack said as he knelt beside Duke and patted the dog on the head. "He only gets this way when he meets bank robbers."

Suspenders' eyes widened. "Shoot him, Charlie!"

Jack knew it was now time to act. In a flash, he pulled the .38 and promptly shot the lantern. Glass shattered and Suspenders howled in surprise. Now under the cover of darkness, Jack took off toward the large pool of water just beyond the parked car. Charlie fired a shot into the area where Jack was just standing. The bright flash of light momentarily gave Jack a quick glimpse of where he was headed. The bag of money was directly in his path, and he snatched it up as he ran by. Without hesitation, he then leapt into the cold, rushing water with Duke right behind him.

The water carried them away swiftly. Jack reached for Duke and grabbed the dog by the collar, keeping him close as they were swept back into the direction from where they'd come. They soon found themselves rushing underneath the blue-green glowworms he'd just been observing mere minutes earlier. The light was enough for him to get a glimpse of what was ahead. The sight made his heart sink. The rushing water seemed to disappear into a smaller opening in the rock wall.

Even if Jack wanted to stop, they were carrying so much speed it would've been next to impossible to do so. All he could do was take a deep breath and prepare to go under. He released Duke's collar, figuring the dog would be better off on his own. If he could find a way out of the rushing water, so be it.

He was then swept violently under the water and into another cave. He felt his hat sweep off his head and he nearly lost the satchel. Jack considered letting the bag of cash go, but soon realized

he could use it as protection from the jagged rocks that were rushing by him. He kept the bag between himself and the cave walls, often bouncing around like a pinball along the way. The swirling waters carried him further and further through the mountain and for the first time Jack began to believe he might drown. He did his best to remain calm and just when it seemed all hope was lost, he saw a bright light ahead. Seconds later, he felt his body rush out of an opening, the cave floor disappearing under him.

Jack reached out and managed to grab a sapling on the rock wall. He dangled for a moment and suddenly realized he was hanging on to the side of the mountain. Water spewed from the rock face, creating a majestic waterfall that was at least 500 feet high. The water eventually landed on a rock that then directed the stream into a large lake below. Again, Jack considered letting the money go, but after a brief struggle, he managed to work the strap over his shoulder. He looked above him and found a ledge to grab onto. Before long he found another, and his ascent began.

Just as he thought all danger had passed, he heard a peculiar sound. It sounded like a man screaming below. Jack looked down just in time to see Suspenders propel from the opening. He'd apparently failed to grab the same sapling Jack had found. Jack could only watch as he plunged to the rock below, screaming the entire way down. There was a sickening *thwack* when he hit bottom that made him cringe.

Mere seconds later, Charlie emerged from the waterfall also. He'd obviously been the cleverer man of the two and proved it once again when he grabbed the sapling. He swung wildly before finally finding the same ledge Jack had found to climb up.

"Stop there, Mr. Nash!" he yelled.

Jack looked down at him and could see he was pointing the gun up at him. He did his best to ignore the threat and continued to climb.

"I'll shoot if you don't stop!" Charlie called after him.

"You shoot me, and your money is going to fall right with me!" Jack yelled back.

Charlie grunted and reluctantly holstered his weapon. It suddenly occurred to him that between the satchel and the bag of money, Jack was carrying a much heavier load as he climbed. It wouldn't take long at all for him to catch the troublesome entomologist.

Satisfied that Charlie wasn't going to shoot him, Jack focused all his attention on climbing. He had no idea that the furious bank robber was catching him quickly. Just as he'd reached the top of the cliff, Jack felt a hand grab his foot and pull him downward. With all the strength he could muster, Jack tossed the bag of money and the satchel onto the rocky ledge. He then looked down at Charlie and

began kicking at him frantically.

Charlie fell but managed to grab another ledge before falling completely to the bottom. He quickly reached for his gun again and pointed it at Jack. He fired the weapon just as Jack managed to pull himself to the top of the cliff. Jack howled in pain as the bullet struck him and then rolled onto the ledge out of harm's way. Charlie roared victoriously and then hurriedly climbed back up the mountain. When he reached the top, he was stunned to see that the bag of money, as well as the entomologist's satchel, had been left behind. The only sign of Jackson Nash was a trail of blood that led toward a crevice on the side of the mountain. Charlie ventured into the crevice, his gun drawn and still pointed ahead of him.

Once inside, he looked right, and then left. There was no sign of Jack. The blood just seemed to stop at the face of a rock wall. What Charlie did not see, however, was that Jack had climbed to another ledge above him. The entomologist leapt from where he'd been hiding and the two men tumbled onto the ground, rolling back toward the edge of the cliff.

Charlie managed to get on top of Jack, and he threw a fist directly toward Jack's face. The entomologist moved his head just in the nick of time. Charlie's fist struck the rock surface with enough force that Jack could hear the bones in his hand break. The bank robber screamed in agony and Jack promptly brought his knee into Charlie's groin with enough force to take the man's breath.

Jack pushed the injured man off him and then dusted himself off as he stood. Charlie rolled around on the ground, howling in pain.

"Your pal should've listened to you," Jack said as he limped back toward his satchel. He reached in and grabbed a roll of twine. "If you guys would've just taken poor Tommy to the hospital, all this could've been avoided."

Charlie looked up at him, still unable to talk. Jack loomed over him for a moment and shook his head. "You grazed my leg, damn you," he said, glancing at all the blood on his shoe. He knelt, wincing a bit as he did so, and then proceeded to tie Charlie's hands and feet with the twine.

Charlie stared at him, and then his mouth moved as he tried to speak.

"I can't hear you," Jack said, moving closer.

"W-what k-kind of entomologist are y-you?" Charlie stammered, every syllable pained.

"Today? A very disgruntled one," Jack grumbled. "Keep still, the cops will be back for you shortly."

Jack scooped up the bag of money and set off down a trail that winded down toward the bottom of the mountain. When he'd almost

reached the bottom, he could hear someone approaching at a rapid pace. He couldn't see who it was due to the curvature of the path ahead. Jack stopped and smiled. Duke suddenly appeared and sprinted faster toward him, tail wagging. The dalmatian was holding his hat in his mouth.

"I knew you'd turn up," he said, dropping to a knee to hug the dog.

Duke released the hat and Jack placed it back on his head.

"Come on, pal," he said, scratching the dog behind the ears. "Let's find the cops and then a place to take a nice hot shower."

Duke barked in agreement and the duo soon disappeared back into the shadows of the forest.

Jackson Nash and the Vector of Peril is available from Amazon
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